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# Diplomarbeit

The postmodern structure of the novels of Paul Auster:  
Moon Palace, The Music of Chance and Oracle Night

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## Declaration of Authenticity

I confirm to have conceived and written this paper in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references either in footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.

## Hinweis

Diese Diplomarbeit hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen der/des Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich, mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Es wird gebeten, diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.

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# I. Introduction

Terms that may immediately come to mind in connection to the name Paul Auster are contingency and fate, self-reflection, solitude and the search for identity. Indeed, he is mostly referred to as the author of *The New York Trilogy* and thus ascribed to the tradition of American Postmodernism. In regard to *City of Glass* and the other two instalments of the *Trilogy* such an association may be appropriate and relatively unproblematic. It seems to be justified by its playful and self-reflexive structure with its various intertextual cross-references and ambiguous symbols. But bearing in mind that, according to Auster, his work is inspired by writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel Beckett, Henry David Thoreau and not least Franz Kafka, probably this definite attribution has to be put into question. This is even more so, as the term postmodernism is itself highly ambivalent and still a controversial concept in modern literary criticism.

In order to examine the postmodern structure of Paul Auster's novels it is thus necessary to take into account his later published works, too. Therefore, three of them will be discussed in the following which, on the one hand, show the variety of topics and narrative forms Auster's texts feature. On the other hand, these examples share certain characteristic markers that are unique for his style of writing. Whereas *Moon Palace* is some sort of modern Bildungsroman telling the story of three generations of the same family, *The Music of Chance* contains elements of the American road novel and seems to be much darker. *Oracle Night*, finally, can be described as the most experimental of the three novels since it combines various convoluted episodes and perhaps resembles most of all the form of *The New York Trilogy*. In spite of these differences, each of the texts may represent Auster's oeuvre as a whole and also the personal development of the author. Accordingly, the following pages will demonstrate that Paul Auster does not write postmodern books, but that he uses elements of postmodernist and modernist literature, in order to find an appropriate form to convey the themes that "haunt him".

## II. Postmodernism

There are few theoretical concepts that caused, and still cause, as many controversial debates as the term postmodernism. The latter refers not only to a literary movement but also to a set of cultural and philosophical streams. Hence, the subject is much too extensive to be discussed in detail, but the following chapter will sum up the most important aspects.

### 2.1. The concepts of modernism and postmodernism

The relationship between modernism and postmodernism has been discussed by a great number of theoreticians, nevertheless, there is no agreement about the definition of these two terms. However, one can distinguish between two different schools of thought:

The first sees postmodernism as a radical break from its predecessor on a formal and on an ideological level as well. In regard to form the ironic tone and playfulness of postmodernist writing are opposed to the serious and philosophical attitude of modernism. Also the sceptical, almost anarchical and unstable style of the former is seen as a rejection of the modernist striving for order and truth in a chaotic world.<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that modernist authors are concerned with so called “epistemological” questions whereas postmodernism is based on the principle of “ontology”. Thus, what is generally called a modernist text basically revolves around questions of knowledge such as “What is there to be known?”, “Who knows it?” or “What are the limits of knowledge?” (McHale, 9) Postmodernist writers, on the other hand, put the whole concept of the world into question. Their texts mark a shift from problems of knowledge to problems of modes of being<sup>2</sup> and imply the existence of multiple worlds, either fictional or real, which sometimes meet at some point or merge completely. Thus, also the concepts of truth, “deeper sense” and transcendental power are deconstructed in various ways. Besides the distinction between ontological and epistemological dominance some critics underline the following difference: modernism has been charged to be politically conservative, elitist and aimed at a rather intellectual readership. Postmodernism, on the other hand, is seen as contesting all traditional ideas and values and refuting totalizing structures.

However, considering the very complexity of the two concepts it may not be useful to simplify this issue because it is the basic principle of postmodernism to “use and abuse the

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<sup>1</sup> See Hutcheon, 50.

<sup>2</sup> See Mc Hale, 10.

characteristics of modernism in order to install a questioning of *both* of the listed extremes”. (Hutcheon, 50)

This less radical view comes closer to the argumentation of the second theory which understands postmodernism as extension and further development of modernism. It foregrounds the similarities between them like, for instance, self-reflexivity, a critical attitude towards history, a break with humanist realism, rationalism and the belief in self-transcendence,<sup>3</sup> a characteristic the first school attributes to modernism alone.

However, postmodernism may be both a radical break with some aspects of modernism and a further development of others which again underlines its paradoxical nature. One of the major differences may be indeed the approach towards history: whereas modernism tends to treat it with a grave seriousness or completely ignored it, its successor rather faces this issue with irony.<sup>4</sup> Concerning the structure, the formerly discussed postmodernist strategies of deconstructing traditional narrative forms cannot be found in modernist texts. They are generally aimed to make the readers recognize conventional frameworks and their arbitrariness without destroying all generally accepted patterns.<sup>5</sup>

The final aspect that should be regarded in this context is the different use of intertextuality. According to the argument that intertextual references can take various different forms in postmodernist writing, which will be shown in the following section, it is difficult to attribute some of them either to the one or the other branches. Nevertheless, it has been claimed that modernist literature privileges canonical texts whereas postmodernist authors do not restrict themselves to such norms. This assumption, however, cannot be maintained, as the following two examples should point out: the reference-texts of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, it seems, cannot be labelled either “high” or “low”. Generally, James Joyce’s works are claimed to be “exemplary both of modernism and postmodernism” (Connor, 68). Julian Barne’s *History of the World in 10 ½ chapters*, on the other hand, is a re-writing of stories from the Bible. At the most, intertextuality in postmodernism can be regarded as a more radical form compared to modernism, but not more.

## 2.2. Strategies of postmodern writing

Although the distinction between modernist and postmodernist literature may be not always clear, both are certainly marked by a number of generic features. The various strategies that

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<sup>3</sup> See Hutcheon, 51.

<sup>4</sup> See Hutcheon, 90.

<sup>5</sup> See Ibsch, 265.

are employed by most of the authors of postmodern texts should be presented in the following.

### 2.2.1. Intertextuality

This term covers a broad range of narrative devices, from a short allusion to the rewriting of other texts or borrowing from another genre. The number of source-texts may vary, but in most cases the author refers to a number of different works.<sup>6</sup>

Before discussing the various forms of intertextuality in postmodernist fiction, the concept as such should be explained briefly: it is important to note that the idea of intertextual reference is not an invention of postmodernism. There are quite a number of traditional texts comprising allusions to several different sources like Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, which includes references to Richardson's *Pamela*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and even the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

In these earlier forms the author integrates elements of some pre-texts, and "the ideal reader does not only understand these references, but is also aware of their presence within his text as well as of the reader's awareness of them." (Broich, 250) This understanding of intertextuality as encoding and decoding of secret messages, comparable to a riddle, has changed considerably over the years: Julia Kristeva's definition is probably the less radical one because text and pre-text can be still distinguished as two separate works. About five years later Jorge Luis Borges suspends this distinction completely and claims that every form of reference to reality is already reference to another text<sup>8</sup>, that indeed all reality is text.

This leads to further assumptions: If a literary work is not seen as an original creation anymore but as part of a whole network of connected texts, the author's function is a different one as well. Roland Barthes coined the term "death of the author" which means that no literary writer is able to create something new but instead merely combines elements of earlier texts which gives meaning to the work in the first place<sup>9</sup>. However, the postmodernist writer does not expect the reader to recognize all of these elements. On the contrary, he may even use his own associations to interpret the narrative although it cannot be denied that the text itself limits the number of possibilities.<sup>10</sup> Another strategy to undermine the idea of an original, independent and stable work of art is to present different levels of reality being part

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<sup>6</sup> See Calinescu, 246.

<sup>7</sup> See Broich, 249.

<sup>8</sup> See Broich, 251.

<sup>9</sup> See Hutcheon, 126.

<sup>10</sup> See Hutcheon, 81.



of one another. Brian McHale calls them “Chinese-box worlds” (McHale, 112), mostly in the form of one or more stories embedded in the main narrative or as a kind of parallel world in which the character finds himself.<sup>11</sup> Thus, intertextuality is one of the basic principles in postmodernist fiction and tightly connected to all concepts discussed in the following.

As diverse as the theoretical approaches are the concrete forms of intertextual reference in postmodernist fiction: The simplest form is the quotation which is a “textual transformation through recontextualisation” (Calinescu, 246). This definition already implicates that the reference text is not copied or simply reformulated but rather used in a different context or heavily manipulated. Although there are several serious rewritings, most authors favour an ironic register. The parody can be seen as the postmodern version of the neo-classical mock-heroic genre<sup>12</sup> and serves various purposes. On the one hand, it seems to be a renunciation of the rather serious style of modernism. It is, on the other hand, also a strategy to challenge traditional structures, wheather ideological, political, social, or aesthetical.<sup>13</sup> Although being frequently used, it is important to note that rewriting is not the basic principle for *all* postmodern narratives. Nevertheless, it is often misinterpreted as the only reliable criterion for defining a postmodern text.<sup>14</sup> Apart from using quotations or the structural framework of other texts, the most effective method is to “borrow” a fictional character from another work. Such a “transmigration of characters from one fictional universe to another” (McHale, 57) undermines the reader’s perception of stable characters and reliable fictional or non-fictional worlds.

### **2.2.2. Self-reflection**

Constant self-reflection and self-conscious representation of a work of art can be seen as one of the main characteristics in postmodernist writing. The crucial point for the writer to make is not to demonstrate, as frequently claimed, that the whole world is a construct of the author existing merely within the text, but to point out that our understanding of reality depends on its representation in artificial works.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, self-reflexivity should not be misunderstood

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<sup>11</sup> See Broich, 254.

<sup>12</sup> See Calinescu, 246.

<sup>13</sup> See Hutcheon, 134.

<sup>14</sup> See Calinescu, 248.

<sup>15</sup> See Cornis-Pope, 259.

as a binary opposition between either mimetic realism or total deconstruction, but as a simultaneous constructing and questioning of systematic narration.<sup>16</sup>

In order to expose their “arbitrariness and conventionality” (Hutcheon, 45) postmodernist writers frequently use common forms of representation, such as coherent plotting and characterisation or omniscient narrators, to put forward the “unpresentable in presentation itself”. (Connor, 67)

Most of the texts that can be subsumed under the term postmodern enable the reader to see how language works and what it is that we understand as a story. This kind of self-referential literature, often labelled as “metafiction”, “metapoetry”, “pure fiction”, “surfiction” or “pastiche”, was and is often reduced to a mere “formal gimmick”. (Cornis-Pope, 257)

However, it should be seen in a broader context because it does not only question so called “grand narratives”, a story that claims “to reveal the meaning of all stories [...] the singular truth inherent in them” (Readings, 63), but also undermines commonly accepted concepts of reality. Many paradoxes which form the basis of postmodernist fiction find their expression in both intertextuality and self-reflexivity.<sup>17</sup>

### **2.2.3. Challenging of reality and truth**

As much as postmodern fiction puts into question the understanding of literary works as either independent constructs or mimetic reproductions of reality, it also challenges the counterpart, the side of reference. This does not mean that reality as such is negated, as it was repeatedly claimed, but that postmodern literature “renders problematic both the denial and the assertion of reference”. (Hutcheon, 145) This again points out that it is not a rejection of earlier literary traditions, but on the contrary, a combination of them in order to undermine the idea of stability. In many cases this is done by the subversion of the traditional point of view, namely one subjective perspective that allows the reader to ‘see’ the fictional world through the eyes of a single person alone. In Metafiction one can find either an overtly manipulative narrator or a number of different voices which are not easily localizable in the text.<sup>18</sup>

In this context another important aspect should be mentioned: the complex relationship between metafictional literature and so called mass media or popular culture. The assumption that postmodernism closes the gap separating high from low art seems to be commonly agreed on, but it does so in order to exploit the deficiencies of both. Linda Hutcheon argues that

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<sup>16</sup> See Cornis-Pope, 261.

<sup>17</sup> See Hutcheon, 43.

<sup>18</sup> See Hutcheon, 160.

“postmodern art does indeed acknowledge the commodification of art in capitalist culture; it does so in order to enable a critique of it through its very exploitation of its power.” (Hutcheon, 207) It is thus not the case that “truth and reference have ceased to exist [...] they have ceased to be unproblematic issues” (Hutcheon, 223) Hence the crucial point is not to negate the existence of reality as such but to underline the inability of both high and popular culture to represent all the existing truths by their monopoly claims.

#### **2.2.4. Non-linear narration**

In order to contest familiar narration styles, a majority of postmodern works uses non-traditional narrative strategies: circularity, open ending and random or “aleatory” arrangement which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The humanist belief in the possibility of steady development, as presented in the historical novel and most obviously in the Bildungsroman, is contradictory to postmodern scepticism. Therefore, linear progress and development are frequently replaced by circularity. In most cases this is based on repetition of similar clusters and events<sup>19</sup> or a circling back to the beginning at the end of a novel. Again, it is not teleological, that is, orderly and coherent narration as such that is contested but the concept upon which we judge it.<sup>20</sup> The question is therefore less if a fictional work is coherent and linear but if the criteria for this decision are trustworthy. This questioning of traditional authority, whether in literature or in a broader socio-political context, is what Hutcheon calls the “ex-centric”:

Most theoretical discussions of difference owe much to the work on the differential system of language and its signifying processes by Saussure, Derrida, Lacan, and others. Meaning can be created only by differences and sustained only by reference to other meaning. Difference is therefore the very basis of the Lacanian definition of the split subject as a meaning producing entity, itself constructed from a system of differences. The single concept of “otherness” has associations of binarity, hierarchy, and supplementarity that postmodern theory and practice seem to want to reject in favour of a more plural and deprivileging concept of difference and the ex-centric. (Hutcheon, 65).

Such a pluralistic concept concerns the level of content as much as that of form. The reader’s expectation to find causal connections from the beginning to the ending of the narrative,

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<sup>19</sup> See Szegedy-Maszak, 276.

<sup>20</sup> See Hutcheon, 57.

something that can be defined as “the story”, is frustrated by the author and often literally leads to nothing. Examples for this circularity would be novels consisting of variations on a mutual theme, as Robert Coover’s *A Night at the Movies* (1987). The focus in such works is on the mutual interference of the episodes and not so much on single moments of revelation, so called “epiphanic points” which are one characteristic of modernist fiction.<sup>21</sup>

However, what most readers expect from conventional narratives besides continuity and development is closure. Thus, an open ending clearly undermines the traditional narrative form. On the basis of Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s theory about closure Mihaly Szegedy-Maszak distinguishes two types of anti-closure: the formal and the thematic. The former describes the sudden break-off of a text in the middle of a sentence, which does not necessarily implicate that any form of higher purpose or meaning is negated.<sup>22</sup> Hence, this form is easier to recognize but may be only perfunctorily non-teleological. The second type can be found in texts which end shortly before the solution or climax is reached. Here it should be said that to a great extent it is the reader who decides whether an ending can be called open because the criterion is if it has gratified his desire or not. A third possibility is a number of variant endings giving the audience the possibility to choose the “right” solution.<sup>23</sup> These three possibilities foreground that closure is not stable but something writer and reader construct together.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, linear, teleological narration is destructed by the arrangement of parallel strands which can be read in any order. This “aleatory arrangement”<sup>25</sup> presupposes that the plot is not based on causality or temporal linearity and refuses all forms of hierarchy: “pre-existing texts are physically cut up, scrambled, and randomly reassembled, or two texts are folded together at random to produce a new, hybrid text.” (McHale, 160) Such “hybrid texts” cannot be reduced to a simple “if A then B” pattern, which can be seen as exclusion of all the other possibilities and is therefore contested by most postmodernist authors.

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<sup>21</sup> See Connor, 74.

<sup>22</sup> See Szegedy-Maszak, 277.

<sup>23</sup> See Szegedy-Maszak, 278.

<sup>24</sup> See Hutcheon, 59.

<sup>25</sup> See Szegedy-Maszak, 279.

### 2.3.Reinterpretation of narrative genres

As postmodernist authors generally aim at leaving old categorisations behind they frequently use various genres in order to subvert them and frustrate the reader's expectation. This again should not be seen simply as destruction of narrative forms in general but as a demonstration of their limitations. Furthermore, the transgression of traditional borderlines should raise the audience's awareness and lead to a more productive role of the reader. Hence, almost every narrative genre can be found in postmodernist literature. The five most frequently used will be discussed here:

First of all there are a great number of texts which are based on the form of the autobiography. Interestingly, the period often called "high postmodernism" during the 1960s and 1970s coincides with a rise of popularity of autobiographical novels. Additionally, the return to a more conservative attitude in the 1980s may have fostered this return to the "conventionally conservative genre of autobiography" (Hornung, 221). But as mentioned before it has not been simply overtaken but used to create texts which reveal their fictional nature self-consciously. Self-reflection is also the basis of all autobiographical works, but instead of portraying retrospectively the life of a person as a unified whole it is presented as contradictory, incomplete or unreliable. Hence, the writing of the autobiographical text should help to overcome the crisis of the fictional character and of the narrative itself.<sup>26</sup> This again points out that postmodernist authors focus on the complexity of personality, the narrative representation and the reader's interpretation of it. Another important aspect to mention is that autobiography is a genre that combines various discourses and forms and thus seems to be an attractive model for writers of metafictional literature.<sup>27</sup>

The second genre which many postmodernist works are modelled on is the historical novel. As Elisabeth Wesseling claims, postmodernist literature consciously falsifies history and thus closes the gap between fiction and non-fiction.<sup>28</sup> Following her argumentation such semi-historical texts should be understood as utopian conceptions which are shifted from the future into the past. The results of which are then texts dealing with the author's imaginary world that often contradicts the actual course of events. The crucial question for postmodernist writers is, however, if there is something like 'true history'. The impossibility to make

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<sup>26</sup> See Hornung, 222.

<sup>27</sup> See Hornung, 222.

<sup>28</sup> See Wesseling, 203.

statements about the past that are not influenced by ideology and subjectivity is one of their central points, but also of earlier literary disciplines such as “New Historicism” (Hutcheon, 91). Linda Hutcheon describes the critical approach towards history and its representation as the main issue of postmodernism or, as she calls it, “Historical Metafiction”:

Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present. (Hutcheon, 97)

This category is characterised by various criteria: the protagonist is in most cases the opposite of the classical “type” and rather represents the margins of society, in other words an “ex-centric” character who could be seen as the personification of the postmodernist refocusing on formerly neglected subjects.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, historical metafiction uses historical data in a subversive manner. It either simply lies in this regard, as mentioned above, or foregrounds the attempt to make sense of historical details. This underlines that it is seldom the end-product which is important for postmodernist narration but the process involved. Thirdly, the appearance of historical figures is not used to “validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence” (Hutcheon, 114) but, on the contrary, to highlight the fictional nature of the narrative.

The next narrative genre is science fiction which covers a very broad range of different texts and again could be divided into further sub-categories, but for this overview the cover-term should serve as a representative. As already pointed out before many theorists and critics have claimed that postmodernism links so called high with popular culture. This assumption is to a great extent based on the integration of characteristic science fiction elements. However, this gap still exists and is, on the contrary, even underlined by the combination of different types of literature in *one* text.<sup>30</sup> What can also be observed is a shift from the 1960s and 1970s to the 1980s until today: In the first period most authors restricted their borrowing to rather outdated forms of science fiction such as superhero comics, disaster and monster movies of pulp-magazines. More modern and popular forms were not used until the 1980s,

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<sup>29</sup> See Hutcheon, 114.

<sup>30</sup> See McHale 1997, 63.

then often in the form of “cyberpunk”, but they can be found frequently among postmodernist texts today.

Another genre that is linked with science fiction in common parlance is fantasy.

Nevertheless, it should be treated separately. Theo D’haen differentiates between the fantastic which treats the supernatural as completely separated from reality, and magic realism which collapses those two spheres.<sup>31</sup> Those texts clearly demonstrate to what degree traditional boundaries are transgressed and underline at the same moment which is what Hutcheon repeatedly calls the “paradox of the postmodern” (Hutcheon, 42).

This paradoxical situation seems to be even more obvious when the source-genre is “familiar and overtly conventionally plotted” (Hutcheon, 133) as it is the case with the western. It is probably the most America specific of the genres discussed here which may be an explanation that many (American) postmodernist authors re-interpret this genre, mostly in an ironic way. Besides the detective-story, the classical western perhaps represents most what can be called a “formula story” (D’haen, 185), as the basic structure could be reduced to good versus evil, whereas both sides are clearly recognizable as such. Nevertheless, the strategy of the postmodernist adaptations is “to reveal the constructed character of these principles by first invoking and then negating the conventions that embody them.”(D’haen, 186) Therefore, the western genre is extremely suitable for postmodernist authors because it allows them to simultaneously construct and deconstruct familiar concepts of both reality and literature. It can be argued that the traditional western portrays what the world should be rather than what it is, something that postmodernist literature contests.

Finally, the genre of detective fiction shall be discussed briefly in this context. Like the formerly mentioned narrative categories structure, content and language of the detective story have changed considerably over the years. Some theorists have pointed out that its earliest form, the so called “golden age” of criminal fiction, coincides with the heyday of modernist writing.<sup>32</sup> This is probably no coincidence because both attempt to bring some kind of order into the chaos. The opposite is the case with the “anti-detective novel”, an innovative form which rejects this principle.<sup>33</sup> Here the detective figures, as they can be found in the works of Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle or Edgar Allan Poe, are substituted by characters that are not in control of the situation and often find the solution by mere accident. Nevertheless, there is

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<sup>31</sup> See D’haen, 284.

<sup>32</sup> See Bertens, 196.

<sup>33</sup> See Bertens, 197.

some form of solution. Not until the postmodernist anti-detective novel, which constitutes a subversion of familiar concepts of order and chaos, the solution is completely suspended.<sup>34</sup> It would be possible to distinguish between various sub-categories which have to be assigned to either a rather modernist or postmodernist branch, but the central point remains the same: It is not only impossible to *find* the true solution to a problem, but something like a single solution *doesn't exist*. Accordingly, the figure of the anti-detective, mostly a rather disturbed and ambivalent character, can be understood as the manifestation of the “ex-centric” and is confronted with a multitude of equivalent possibilities instead of solutions.

### III. Postmodernism and the novels of Paul Auster

With the publication of *The New York Trilogy*, Auster has acquired the reputation of writing in the tradition of literary postmodernism. Such a categorisation, however, is problematic since Auster's later writings differ in many respects from his first works. Beginning with *In The Country of Last Things*, his novels are increasingly marked by social and political commitment and an interest in the nature of human existence.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, many of the postmodernist features employed in *City of Glass* and the other two novels of the *Trilogy* still characterise Auster's stories. This will be demonstrated in the following by the examples *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Oracle Night*.

#### 3.1. Structural and formal features

Many of these postmodern literary devices influence the novels on a structural and formal level. In this regard certain similarities can be observed in Auster's works which will be shown by means of a number of examples from each of the three books. Additionally, this analysis will underline that each novel constitutes an independent work of literature in which postmodern features are used in a different context and for a different purpose.

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<sup>34</sup> See Bertens, 197.

<sup>35</sup> See Martin, X



### 3.1.1. Narrative and formal style

Generally one can observe that Auster's style of writing is reduced and the language almost minimalist. By referring to the influence of oral tradition and fairy tales on his work he states:

These are bare bone narratives, narratives largely devoid of details, yet enormous amounts of information are communicated in a very short space, with very few words. [...] The text is no more than a springboard for the imagination [...]. I want my books to be all heart, all center, so say what they have to say in as few words as possible. (Art of Hunger, 296-297)

This is most obvious in descriptions of landscape and environment which mostly lack any pictorial details. Nevertheless, there are several exceptions to this rule, but only if they serve a function:

By the time they came to Flemington, the thunderstorm had passed. Sunlight broke through the dispersing clouds, and the wet land shimmered with sudden, almost supernatural clarity. The trees stood out more sharply against the sky, and even the shadows seemed to cut more deeply into the ground, as if their dark, intricate outlines had been etched with the precision of scalpels. (Music, 57)

This passage conveys a specific mood and gives the scene an almost dreamlike quality. It also underlines the – at this point still – positive emotions of the characters in order to highlight the contrast to the subsequent events.

The minimalist form is in general one of the characteristic features of postmodern literature which renounces the tradition of literary realism with its detailed, highly realistic descriptions. Hence, by using a reduced language instead, postmodernist authors stress the autonomy of their work as a piece of art in contrast to a mere imitation of nature. However, there seems to be a gradual difference to 'typically postmodern' authors such as Barth, Hawkes, Barthelme or Coover. Their narrative style could be described as "emotional and intellectual minimalism" (Hoffman, 540) which means that descriptions are restricted to the surface so that the story is based on observable events and behaviour. Whereas the three books of *The New York Trilogy*, frequently referred to as "metafiction", may be closer to such a "diagrammatic style" (Hoffmann, 441), this is not the case with Auster's later novels. It could be even argued that by reducing them to "bare bone narratives" the author moves away from the surface and focuses on the plot and the inner processes of his protagonists. Techniques like the "stream of consciousness" are a typical feature of modernist literature which underlines the argument

that Auster's writing is likewise influenced by the modernist and postmodernist tradition. This probably positions him in the field of so called "later postmodern fictions" which "mostly attenuate the incongruities of surface and language and aim at a more coherent but still minimalistic style." (Hoffmann, 550) Auster's narratives depend on the personal tone of the respective narrator rather than sophisticated, artful language: "All the elegant passages, all the curious details, all the so-called beautiful writing – if they are not truly relevant to what I am trying to say, then they have to go. It's all in the voice." (Art of Hunger, 265)

Consequently the question of narrative voice will be discussed briefly:

In spite of the fact that only *Oracle Night* and *Moon Palace* are written from a first person perspective, one can say that all three novels "adhere to the tenets of "stream of consciousness" novels". (Martin, 21) The general tone of the texts is characterised by the protagonist's voice. Paul Auster himself claims that each of his works has

developed out of the particular narrative voice I have chosen. Yes, obviously a novel written in the first person is going to sound more intimate than one written in the third person. But there's a vast range within those two categories, and it's possible to bring the boundaries of first-person and third-person so close to each other that they touch, even overlap. (Art of Hunger, 302)

*Moon Palace* is narrated from the perspective of the main character Marco Stanley Fogg who is, nonetheless, relegated to the position of outside-observer when first his grandfather and later his father tell their stories to him. In this regard its narrative situation is similar to *The Locked Room*, the third instalment of *The New York Trilogy*, because this is "an intimate, first person narrative that veers off into the third person. There are long passages in that book where Fogg literally disappears." (Art of Hunger, 303)

The opposite is true for *The Music of Chance*, a third-person narrative, in which the voice of the narrator "is so close to the first person, is so deeply imagined from Nashe's point of view". (Art of Hunger, 303) Interestingly, this ostensibly impersonal tone seems to be more intimate for Auster and allows him to include more autobiographical elements than in his other works.<sup>36</sup>

*Oracle Night*, finally, does not shift between third- and first-person perspective. Despite the fact that there are a number of stories nested into the main-plot, the main character Sidney Orr is present as narrator throughout the whole novel. One reason for this may be that Orr works

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<sup>36</sup> See Art of Hunger, 304.

as author himself so that he may be described as a professional narrator. Consequently every sub-narrative is reflected by him and rendered in his own voice.

To sum up this point, it can be noted that Auster uses a variety of narrative voices in order to express the perspective of each individual character. Nevertheless, this may be also interpreted as a postmodern literary device in order to undermine the expectation of the reader who is never able to finally verify the truth value of each narrative.<sup>37</sup>

The third aspect that will be discussed here is irony and the so called “comic mode” that is “all-present in postmodern texts”. (Hoffmann, 547) Many theoreticians, and especially Linda Hutcheon, repeatedly stressed the critical function of irony in postmodernism.<sup>38</sup> The term as such signifies “a subtle humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance.” (Baldick, 130) The following example from *The Music of Chance* clearly demonstrates how Auster uses this strategy to subvert the clichéd idea of the “American dream”: Before Nashe leaves his short-time lover Fiona for the last time he states:

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back. I’m a free man now, and I can do whatever I bloody want.”  
“This is America, Nashe. The home of the goddamn free, remember? We can all do what we want.” (Music, 15)

The full meaning of this statement becomes clear only in the second part of the novel in which the two main protagonists are imprisoned and sentenced to a cruel punishment. Auster frequently offers criticism on modern (American) life in his novels so that, apparently, the ironical mode is indeed relevant to all of them.<sup>39</sup> The topos of the ‘American way of life’ is also an integral part of *Oracle Night*, and especially of *Moon Palace*. The term that is probably most appropriate for this novel is “tragicomedy” which means a “complex blending of serious and light moods”. (Baldick, 261) *Moon Palace* contains a number of absurd details and overtly humorous remarks: When Fogg reports on his beginning love-relationship with the Chinese girl Kitty Wu he adds: “Had Uncle Victor lived to meet her, I’m sure he would have appreciated the fact that Marco, in his own small way, had at last set foot in China.” (Moon Palace, 7) Apart from that, Fogg can be described, at least to a certain extent, as a naïve hero because he is represented from the viewpoint of his older self who subtly mocks

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<sup>37</sup> See Martin, 99.

<sup>38</sup> See Hutcheon, 51.

<sup>39</sup> See Martin, 6.

the “follies of his adolescence”. (Art of Hunger, 309) Thus in the novel his “view of the world differs widely from the true circumstances recognized by the author and readers”. (Baldick, 130) In this context it is interesting to note that Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* is subtitled *a tragicomedy in two acts* which underlines the influence of his work on Auster’s writing. On the other side, there are very few instances of truly comical remarks in *The Music of Chance* and *Oracle Night*, both of which are written in a more serious tone. This points out that whether the style can be labelled ironical or not depends on the narrative voice of the respective novel rather than on the story, which, in all three cases, combines comic and tragic elements.

The final issue is the grotesque which is generally “characterized by bizarre distortions, [and] especially [...] exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features.” (Baldick, 108) In postmodern fiction, the term is inextricably linked with the concept of mystery:

The disappearance of certainty and the emergence of the uncertain and inexplicable, of the gap and the mystery of the void are wide-spread phenomena in the post-postmodern novel. The mysterious often grows out of the grotesque, the deformation of humans by humans, which acts as the basis and cause of the mysterious and gives it a critical aspect. (Hoffmann, 631)

Auster points out that the “mysterious goings-on in the world” (Art of Hunger, 273) are a central subject of his works. The grotesque, however, has to be treated separately because it describes a specific kind of mystery which involves “[u]ncertainty of motives, uncalled-for brutality, and terrifying violence”. (Hoffmann, 610)

In each of the three novels, various instances of the grotesque can be found:

The first example, and probably the most ‘harmless’ one, is a passage from *Moon Palace* in which Fogg describes his comrades at the army physical:

One boy, with hideous acne all over his face and back, sat trembling in a corner talking to himself. Another had a withered arm. Another, who weighed no less than three hundred pounds, stood against a wall making farting noises with his lips, laughing after each outburst like a troublesome seven-year-old. These were the simpletons, the grotesques, the young man who did not belong anywhere. (Moon Palace, 79)

This also indicates that the concepts of the grotesque and the “tragicomic” are in most cases closely related to each other. However, this is not true for the following two examples:

In *The Music of Chance*, Nashe finds his friend the morning after Jack Pozzi's attempt to flee from the meadow in which the two men are imprisoned:

At first he saw no more than an indistinguishable heap, a bundle of blood-spattered clothing sprawled out on the ground, and even after he saw that a man was in those clothes, he did not see Pozzi so much as a he saw a hallucination [...] For the man's limbs were oddly tangled and inert, and from the way his head was cocked to one side (twisted in an almost impossible angle, as if the head were about to separate itself from the body). (Music, 156)

Obviously, this scene contains no comical or ironical elements, which is further underlined by the fact that it is reminiscent of a tragic incident in Auster's childhood.<sup>40</sup>

The last example is Auster's rendering of Jacob, John Trause's son, in *Oracle Night*:

He looked taller than the last time I had seen him, but with his black clothes and green hair and excessively thin body, there was something grotesque and clownish about him, as if he were a ghostly Punchinello on his way to perform a dance for the Duke of Death. (Oracle Night, 174)

At the end of the novel the threat is even intensified when Jacob intrudes into Orr's flat:

The green-headed clown I'd talked to on Saturday had been disturbing enough, but this new creature scared me, and I didn't want to let him in [...] he was punching Grace in the mouth and kicking her in the belly with his thick leather boots. She tried to fight back, but each time she stood up, he slugged her in the face, banged her against the wall, and threw her to the floor. (Oracle Night, 207, 211)

Later Jacob is referred to as "a monster" and "the unmentionable". He can be seen as an instance of the so called "monstrous" which means the "postmodern outgrowth of the grotesque, the ineffable extremity of evil." (Hoffmann, 25-26) Thus the figure of Jacob is also a personification for "the world gone crazy" (Oracle Night, 212) and perhaps represents Auster's critique on human society, one of the essential issues in *Oracle Night*.

### 3.1.2. Self-reference

One of the most characteristic features of Auster's prose is the recurrence of certain themes and character types, many of which are evidently taken from his own life.<sup>41</sup> In spite of the

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<sup>40</sup> See *Art of Hunger*, 278.

fact that each novel has to be seen as an independent work, it is connected to one or more of the other texts, which results in the construction of a so called “super-text”.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, a single novel could be understood as an episode in one all-encompassing narrative:

To say that “all my books are the same book” is probably too simple. What I mean is that all my books are connected by their common source, by the preoccupation they share. [...] If all these books were put together in one volume, they would form the book of my life so far, a multi-faceted picture of who I am. (Art of Hunger, 281)

By deliberately pointing at these similarities and links, such as re-using characters from previous novels, he makes his process of story writing more transparent for the reader. Thus he uses a distinctly postmodern technique.<sup>43</sup>

Besides numerous cross-references to various literary works and allusions to historical facts, *Moon Palace* contains a number of self-referential devices. First of all, the name of the protagonist Marco Stanley Fogg probably alludes to a passage at the beginning of the *City of Glass* where Quinn is reading in Marco Polo’s *Travels*.<sup>44</sup> The quest-theme is one of the basic elements of *Moon Palace* and Fogg’s name is repeatedly associated with the historical figure Marco Polo. When Effing, Fogg’s blind grandfather, wants him to read out aloud several travel narratives, also the issue of their truth value is raised. Although this question recurs in all of Auster’s novels this may further stress the connection between *Moon Palace* and *City of Glass*. That is indicated by a sentence Quinn finds in Marco Polo’s report: “We will set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication [...] it contains nothing but the truth.” (*City of Glass*, 12) Auster also applies another, specifically postmodernist technique and includes characters of earlier works. Fogg’s best friend David Zimmer, for instance, had been

in love with the same person for the last two or three years, a girl by the name of Anna Bloom or Blume, I was never sure of the spelling. She had grown up across the street from Zimmer in the New Jersey suburbs and had been in the same class as his sister, which meant that she was a couple of years younger than he was. [...] Earlier in the summer, she had suddenly taken off to join her older brother, William, who worked as a journalist in some foreign country, and since then Zimmer had not received a word from her – not a letter, not a postcard, nothing. (*Moon Palace*, 86)

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<sup>41</sup> See Martin, 22.

<sup>42</sup> See McHale, 57.

<sup>43</sup> See Hoffmann, 294.

<sup>44</sup> See Springer, 53.

This passage obviously alludes to his novel *In the Country of Last Things*, published in 1987, in which the main character is a woman called Anna Blume. She comes to a dystopian, unnamed city in order to search her missing brother William. With the formulation “some foreign country”, on the one hand, Auster plays with the title of the book; on the other hand, he may contradict the speculation that the city portrayed in the book actually *is* New York. The additional information that Zimmer has got neither a letter nor a postcard seems ironical, considering the fact that *In the Country of Last Things* is an epistolary novel consisting of one long letter written by Anna Blume.

Whereas she is a character from an earlier book, David Zimmer does not appear again until Auster’s eighth work of fiction *Book of Illusions* from 2002. The protagonist Zimmer decides to write a book about the less known comedian Hector Mann after losing his family in a plane crash. This may indicate that a character which plays only a subordinate role in one story is doubtlessly the main character of *some* other. If it is the identical character that recurs in different texts one could speak of “retour de personnages” (McHale, 57). Indeed, whether this is the case here or not cannot be definitely clarified.

*The Music of Chance* also contains instances of self-reference, even if they may not be that obvious. Firstly, the two eccentric millionaires Flower and Stone seem to be modelled on the characters Teddy and Casey in Auster’s “postmodern autobiography” (Martin, 12) *Hand to Mouth* which constitutes a mixture of fictional and autobiographical elements. Nevertheless, the millionaires are referred to as Laurel and Hardy by John Pozzi: “That’s what I call them, Laurel and Hardy. One’s fat and the other’s thin, just like old Stan and Ollie.” (Music, 28) These are in turn the names of the protagonists of Auster’s first, rather unsuccessful, play *Laurel and Hardy go to Heaven* from 1976 which was later also appended to *Hand to Mouth*. The framework of *The Music of Chance* is based on this play:

The play that I mentioned earlier, the one that was performed in the seventies, was about two men building a wall. [...] I was never satisfied by it, but at the same time I couldn’t get rid of the idea. It plagued me and haunted me for all those years. So this was my attempt to improve on what I had done with it the first time.  
(Art of Hunger, 311)

Apart from that, Nashe and Pozzi show striking similarities with the title-figures of Samuel Beckett’s novel *Mercier and Camier*:

Like Flaubert's Bouvard and Pecuchet, like Laurel and Hardy, like the other "pseudo couples" in Beckett's work, they are not so much separate characters as two elements of a tandem reality, and neither one could exist without the other. (Art of Hunger, 75)

This example points out that Auster's texts can be described as a complex interplay of intertextual references to the works of others and his own texts. Indeed, the recurrence of story elements is not restricted to characters. Certain place names are transmigrated from one narrative to another, too: Jim Nashe's first encounter with Jack Pozzi takes place "somewhere in the middle of Dutchess County [...] Not far from the village of Millbrook" (Music, 18) This place is also the setting of an accident in his early detective novel *Squeeze Play*. Additionally, *The Invention of Solitude* and *Hand to Mouth*, both basically autobiographical novels, contain detailed description of a house in Dutchess County.<sup>45</sup> Hence, in Auster's novels places often serve as - hypothetical - crossing-points of various fictional and non-fictional levels.

Although in *Oracle Night* one can find a number of characteristic topoi, it is more difficult to specify concrete instances of references to earlier works. On the contrary, it appears to be a source-text for subsequent novels as the following examples demonstrate:

Towards the end of the book, the protagonist Sidney Orr gets a manuscript by his fatherly friend John Trause. As he explains, it is a story about

the cutthroat machinations of a political conspiracy, but it was also about a marital triangle (a wife running off with her husband's best friend), [...] "The Empire of Bones" was a premonition of things to come. It had been put in a box and left to incubate for thirty years, and little by little it had evolved into a story about the woman we both loved – my wife, my brave and struggling wife. (Oracle Night, 202)

Certainly this passage is important for the subsequent events in *Oracle Night* but it also anticipates the subplot of one of Auster's latest works *Travels in the Scriptorium*. The imprisoned main-character Mr. Blank finds a typescript on his desk which turns out to be a fictional report by a man named Graf. It is about a political conspiracy, plotted by Graf's friend Land, whom he also suspects to have an affair with his wife Beatrice: "If Land had betrayed the Confederation, [I had] to put him under arrest [...] if my friend had betrayed me by stealing my wife and daughter, then I was planning to kill him." (Travels in the Scriptorium, 74-75) Apparently, the short allusion in *Oracle Night* is another example of an

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<sup>45</sup> See Springer, 54.



idea that “plagued” and “haunted” the author until he developed it further in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. In respect to this book it has to be noted that its entire story consist of self-referential devices. The last example may be another case of what Umberto Eco called “transworld identity” (Eco, 230): At the end of Sydney Orr’s novel fragment, his main-character Nick Bowen is locked up in an underground room. Apparently Auster comes back to this idea in his most recent book *Man in the Dark*. It begins with seventy-two-year-old August Brill inventing a story because he cannot fall asleep. He decides to “put a sleeping man in a hole, and then see what happens” (*Man in the Dark*, 3). The name of this man turns out to be Owen Brick which is probably an anagram of Nick Bowen.

### 3.1.3. Intertextual reference

The concept of intertextuality is an essential feature of postmodern art and literature, perhaps also due to the fact that it is closely related to history. Inevitably, every source-text constitutes an element of the past as it must have been written prior to the text that refers to it. It can be claimed that postmodernism is generally intensely concerned with history and consciously demonstrates its dependence upon traditional forms. These forms, that Barthes calls the “doxa”, are established and undermined at the same time and frequently questioned or subverted by parody.<sup>46</sup>

This is only partly the case with the novels of Paul Auster who indeed uses ideas from various sources and refers to a number of different works; nonetheless, he does this scarcely to parody or mock those sources. Referring to his autobiographical novel *The Book of Memory* he says: “That’s why that book is filled with so many references and quotations, in order to pay homage to all the others inside me.” (*Art of Hunger*, 301) This seems to be true for most of his works and again stresses the assumption that he is merely to a certain extent influenced by postmodernist practices.

The following examples will demonstrate that many of the authors and texts Auster refers to are European which has led to his reputation as an “American entirely oriented toward Europe”. (Bruckner, 31) However, if one looks at some of his main motifs, such as the “American dream” and the microcosm New York, it becomes clear that he “does not write European books in America; he enriches the American novel with European themes.” (Bruckner, 31)

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<sup>46</sup> See Allen, 190.

The first example from *Moon Palace* again points out the tremendously strong influence of Franz Kafka on Paul Auster's books: The episode in which the main character Fogg refuses to work and consequently almost starves to death clearly takes up the motif of the 'Hunger Artist' which is discussed in Auster's essay "The Art of Hunger". The first part of the essay, however, deals with Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* which is described as "a work devoid of plot, action, and – but for the narrator – character." (Art of Hunger, 10) Concerning the protagonist we hear: "The hero suffers, but only because he has chosen to suffer [...] From the very beginning it is made clear that the hero need not starve." (Art of Hunger, 11) This is certainly true for Fogg, too. In addition to that, Auster hints at the similarity with Raskolnikov, the main character of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. It may have been a source text for *Hunger* that was published about thirteen years later. The main difference between Hamsun's hero and the protagonist of Kafka's story *A Hunger Artist*, the second text Auster treats in his essay, is that the latter is "an artist whose art consists in fasting" (Art of Hunger, 19) whereas the fast does not have any aesthetic function in *Hunger*. In this respect it is difficult to draw any parallels between him and Fogg who, at this stage of the novel, has hardly any artistic ambitions. This shows that Auster may include character traits of various paragons but that his figures are never copies of the original.

The second example from *Moon Palace* is a reference to a European writer, too:

Then I began to describe Cyrano's voyage to the moon, and someone interrupted me. Cyrano de Bergerac wasn't real, the person said, he was a character in a play, a make-believe man. I couldn't let this error go uncorrected, and so I made a short digression to tell them the story of Cyrano's life. (Moon Palace, 37)

This allusion is noteworthy in a twofold sense: Firstly, it takes up one of the key-themes of the novel namely the "voyage to the moon". Secondly, the fictional character Cyrano de Bergerac is often used synonymously for a ghost-writer as he agrees to compose love-poems in the name of another man.<sup>47</sup> Thus Fogg, who later writes the memoirs in the name of his grandfather, may have certain parallels with Rostand's tragic hero.

The third instance of intertextual reference mentioned here is an allusion to a piece of music. Reporting on a conversation with his father concerning their personal preferences "in every area of life we could think of" Fogg says: "he found Couperin dull, whereas I could never get enough of *Les Barricades Mystérieuses*." (Moon Palace, 282) This musical work appears again as a kind of metaphor in *The Music of Chance* in which music, as the title may

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<sup>47</sup> See Liukkonen.

suggest, bears symbolic significance. In the course of the story, Nashe plays the piece on his electronic keyboard:

‘The Mysterious Barricades.’ It was impossible for him to play this last piece without thinking about the wall, and he found himself returning to it more often than any of the others. [...] The music started and stopped, then started again, then stopped again, and yet through it all the piece continued to advance, pushing on toward a resolution that never came. Were those the mysterious barricades? [...] As far as he was concerned, the barricades stood for the wall he was building in the meadow, but that was quite another thing from knowing what they meant. (Music, 165)

The two quotes above illustrate that the works which influence Auster’s writing are not only included indirectly, in the form of a certain character or motif, but that he overtly refers to them, perhaps in order to “pay homage”.

A literary source that plays a major, if not the central, role in *The Music of Chance* is Rousseau’s *Confessions*. It is Nashe’s reading material when he and Pozzi stay at the Plaza Hotel in New York. He feels especially attracted by the passage in which the author starts to throw stones at the trunk of a tree. Rousseau says to himself: “If I hit that tree with this stone [...] then all will go well with my life from now on.” (Music, 49) When he throws the stone he misses his target but decides that this attempt doesn’t count. The same thing happens again and the author finally asserts himself that it is “the next one that really counts. But just to make sure, he walks right up to the tree this time, positioning himself directly in front of the target.” Of course, he hits the trunk this time and gladly concludes that his life will be better from this moment on. Although Nashe finds this episode amusing he is

too embarrassed by it to want to laugh. There was something terrible about such candor, finally, and he wondered where Rousseau had found the courage to reveal such a thing about himself, to admit to such naked self-deception. (Music, 49)

The further course of the story reveals the relevance of this passage because at first Nashe follows Rousseau’s example. He ostensibly opens himself up to accident but, not liking the results, he narrows the odds until chance is almost eliminated. His journey and the experiences he makes, however, deeply affect his personality so that he is also able to admit his own “self-deception”.

The next reference is probably a less obvious one. Nevertheless, it concerns an essential element of the plot namely the reason for the two protagonists to build a wall after the poker

game: The millionaires Flower and Stone discovered a fifteenth-century castle on a trip to Ireland which Flower describes as “no more than a heap of stones, really, sitting forlornly in a little valley or glen [...] I decided to buy it and have it shipped back to America” (Music, 77). It seems likely that Auster has taken this idea from an episode in *Life: A User's Manual* by the French author Georges Perec, in which a wealthy American woman buys a historical castle in France and has it shipped back to the United States stone by stone.<sup>48</sup> In his essay “The Bartlebooth Follies” Auster writes about the central episode of *Life A User's Manual* which tells the story of an eccentric elderly man named Bartlebooth:

Like many of the other stor[i]es in *Life* Bartlebooth's weird saga can be read as a parable (of sorts) about the efforts of the human mind to impose an arbitrary order to the world. Again and again, Perec's characters are swindled, hoaxed, and thwarted in their schemes, and if there is a darker side to this book, it is perhaps to be found in this emphasis on the inevitability of failure. (Art of Hunger, 167)

This description of the main character could also be applied to Nashe because he must learn from his experiences that he has to accept certain contingent occurrences in his life or, in other words, the “inevitability of failure”. Furthermore, the name of Perec's protagonist may be an illusion to Melville's short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*. The (anti)-hero of this famous narrative refuses to work and to eat with the words “I would prefer not to” (Melville, 13) and finally dies from starvation. The parallels between Melville's *Bartleby* and Fogg in *Moon Palace* may be obvious.

Apart from these allusions which are indeed relevant to basic elements of the story, such as characterisation and plot, there are also some rather playful cross-references:

When Nashe and Pozzi manage to put into the wall their thousandth stone we hear:

Uncharacteristically, the kid then hopped up onto the stones and started prancing down the length of the row, holding out his arms like a tightrope walker. Nashe was glad to see the kid respond in that way, and as he watched the small figure tiptoe off into the distance, following the pantomime of the high-wire stunt (as though he were in danger, as though he were about to fall from a great height) [...] he felt himself on the verge of tears. (Music, 134)

Auster may have been inspired by the French tightrope artist Philippe Petit to whom he dedicated the essay “On the High Wire”.<sup>49</sup> Besides that, it is perhaps no coincidence that Pozzi is repeatedly described as being small considering the fact that this is the English

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<sup>48</sup> See Springer, 39.

<sup>49</sup> See Art of Hunger, 239-250.

translation of the French term 'petit'. In this context it is noteworthy that Petit perhaps also forms the genesis of Auster's novel *Mr Vertigo*.<sup>50</sup> The name Pozzi, in turn, could be an allusion to the character Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>51</sup>

The first, and also a fairly obvious intertextual reference in *Oracle Night*, can be found at the beginning of the book: The author-figure John Trause draws Orr's attention to an anecdote from a detective-novel by Dashiell Hammett:

He was referring to the Flitcraft episode in the seventh chapter of *The Maltese Falcon*, the curios parable that Sam Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy about a man who walks away from his life and disappears. (*Oracle Night*, 12)

Orr, a novelist, outlines the beginning of a new story based on the so called Flitcraft episode which is then a pivotal part of the novel *Oracle Night*. Bearing this in mind it may be remarkable that Fogg mentions a similar incident in *Moon Palace*. Referring to his narrative on Cyrano de Bergerac's life he says:

I told them [...] how he had been killed on a Paris street when a building stone fell from a rooftop and landed on his head. [...] 'He was only thirty-six at the time,' I said, and to this day no one knows if it was an accident or not. Had one of his enemies murdered him, or was it simply a matter of chance, of blind fate pouring destruction down from the sky? (*Moon Palace*, 37)

This kind of anecdote seems to lend itself to the novels of Paul Auster as the concepts of chance and fate are integral elements of them. The Flitcraft episode thus seems to be one of the stories which "haunted" (*Art of Hunger*, 311) the author. By referring to Hammet's book he alludes to one of the 'classics' of crime or mystery fiction, a genre his work has often been attributed to after the publication of *The New York Trilogy*. Auster himself always rejected such a classification. Nonetheless, he states:

That's not to say that I have anything against the genre. The mystery, after all, is one of the oldest and most compelling forms of storytelling, and any number of works can be placed in that category: *Oedipus Rex*, *Crime and Punishment*, a whole range of twentieth-century novels. In America, there's no question that people like Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain are legitimate writers, writers who have contributed something important to the language. It's a mistake to look down on the popular forms. (*Art of Hunger*, 261)

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<sup>50</sup> See Bilton, 77.

<sup>51</sup> See Springer, 38.

Moreover, the fact that the owner of the store to whom Fogg sells his inherited books is called Chandler could be understood as homage to Raymond Chandler. These examples point out that Auster includes both works of so called “high” and “low art” which is an important feature of postmodern literature.<sup>52</sup>

The final example of intertextuality in *Oracle Night* is an allusion to Henry David Thoreau, an author whose style greatly influenced Auster’s writing: In *Ghosts*, the second instalment of *The New York Trilogy*, the protagonist Blue tries to apply the philosophy of *Walden* to his own writing and fails.<sup>53</sup> Auster even claims that the spirit of Thoreau dominates the whole novel as

another kind of passionate excess. The idea of living a solitary life, of living with a kind of monastic intensity – and all the dangers that entails. Walden Pond in the heart of the city [...] The determination to reject everyday American life, to go against the grain, to discover a more solid foundation for oneself.  
(*Art of Hunger*, 263)

This author plays an even more important role in *Leviathan*. The ‘mission’ of the main character Sachs is inspired by Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* so that he begins to increasingly resemble his idol in the course of the story.<sup>54</sup> Self-determination, individuality and solitude are also inherent themes of *Oracle Night*: Nick Bowen, the protagonist of the story inspired by the formerly mentioned Flitcraft episode, gets to know some Ed Victory in Kansas City. When he visits him in his small apartment

Ed grunts by way of response, then asks Bowen to take a seat, unexpectedly referring to a passage from *Walden* as he gestures toward the one chair in the room. Thoreau said he had three chairs in his house, Ed remarks. One for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society. I’ve only got the one for solitude. Throw in the bed and maybe there’s two for friendship. But there’s no society in here. I had my fill of that piloting my hack. (*Oracle Night*, 65)

Essential themes in Thoreau’s *Walden* such as the position of an individual in society, the role of solitude in finding it and human behaviour in general are key-issues in *Oracle Night* and indeed in most of Auster’s texts. Nevertheless, it has to be said that there is a marked difference between *Ghosts* and *Oracle Night* because in contrast to Blue, who is portrayed as a solitary character, Orr lives in a network of relationships and has to accept his responsibility

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<sup>52</sup> See McHale, 59.

<sup>53</sup> See Martin, 18.

<sup>54</sup> See Martin, 205.

for others. This points out that Auster is deeply affected by a limited number of philosophical concepts, in this case American Transcendentalism, but also by French poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida.<sup>55</sup> However, as the example above may indicate, the focus of the novels has shifted since the publication of *The New York Trilogy* as the interaction between the single protagonists becomes increasingly important.

### **3.1.3.1. Elements of different genres: Bildungsroman and fairy tale, picaresque novel and fantastic novel**

The blurring of genre boundaries is a defining element of literary postmodernism.<sup>56</sup> Many authors use this technique to establish a specific framework and at the same time to undermine its particular conventions. Paul Auster makes frequent use of this strategy and focuses solely on single aspects of each genre, emphasising those features that contribute to the central themes of the narrative.<sup>57</sup> Referring to *The New York Trilogy* he states:

[I]n the same way that Cervantes used chivalric romances as the starting point for *Don Quixote*, or the way that Beckett used the standard vaudeville routine as the framework for *Waiting for Godot*, I tried to use certain genre conventions to get to another place, another place altogether [which is the] question of who is who and whether or not we are who we think we are. (Art of Hunger, 261-262)

This applies not only to the three books of the *Trilogy*, in which Auster plays with characteristic features of the detective story, but also to *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Oracle Night*.

In *Moon Palace* the influence of two different genres becomes apparent namely the Bildungsroman and the fairy tale. Auster himself points at the similarity to the latter and states that the novel “resembles a typical story by the Brothers Grimm” (Art of Hunger, 311). Furthermore, it can be argued that *The Thousand and One Tales of Arabian Nights* constitutes a model for his form of storytelling.<sup>58</sup> This impression is underlined by Fogg’s account of an opulent breakfast of which he partook during the phase of his self starvation. He says:

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<sup>55</sup> See Barone, 84.

<sup>56</sup> See Martin, 42.

<sup>57</sup> See Martin, 41.

<sup>58</sup> See Martin, 41.

It was as though I had suddenly been put down in the middle of a fairy tale. I was the hungry child who had been lost in the woods, and now I had found the enchanted house, the cottage built of food. (Moon Palace, 34)

This allusion appears appropriate because the basic structure of *Moon Palace* strongly resembles the form of a fairy tale. Basically, the novel is about a young man who has to prove his courage and fulfil several tasks until he is rewarded with his fortune, which is not money in this case, as Fogg's whole inheritance is stolen, but self-recognition. At the end of the novel he has gained knowledge of his origins and himself. Therefore at last the whole narrative appears harmonious and coherent because all the loose ends are tied up. This is comparable to the fairy tale universe which is "a controlled world [...] Where we had always sensed disorder, suddenly we see there can be order." (Rabkin, 57) The close relation to this genre is further stressed by the focus on imagination and fantasy. This may be exemplified by the following: on their way home, Effing and Fogg encounter a man who carries an open umbrella of which the cloth has been stripped off. On top of that it does not rain. The man invites them to "join him under the umbrella" and introduces himself as Orlando. Fogg remarks:

he was a gifted comedian, tiptoeing nimbly around imaginary puddles, warding off raindrops by tilting the umbrella at different angles, and chattering on the whole way in a rapid-fire monologue of ridiculous associations and puns. This was imagination in its purest form: the act of bringing nonexistent things to life, of persuading others to accept a world that was not really there. (Moon Palace, 204)

Hence, Orlando seems to personify fantasy and storytelling which are central elements of both *Moon Palace* and the fairy tale. This is underlined by the way in which this incident influences the further course of the story because it is this broken umbrella that finally leads to Effing's death. Fogg notes: "It was almost as if our meeting with Orlando had been a premonition of things to come, an augury of Effing's fate." (Moon Palace, 205) Imagination thus forms the basis of Effing's and Fogg's life and consequently of the novel as a whole. Additionally, this episode may be understood as an allusion to the painting "The poor poet" ("Der arme Poet") by the German artist Carl Spitzweg which shows a very old man, apparently a writer, sitting on a mattress in his bedroom and shielded from the rain only by a black umbrella.

Secondly, the novel could be characterised as a "contemporary Bildungsroman". (Martin, 68) The term has been coined originally to describe a specific sort of German novel



such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, to name only one example. As the genre later also found its way into British and American literature, numerous attempts have been made to translate the term with "novel of formation", "novel of apprenticeship" or "novel of development". (Vanderwerken, 4) Although it seems to be almost impossible to agree on an exact definition, the genre is marked by certain conventions: generally a Bildungsroman

features a youth, who may or may not be from the provinces but who usually is outside of the family context, undergoing a series of initiations and educational experiences, some through books and classrooms, but most often on the street, and encountering possible mentors and guides who may or may not be truthful and helpful. Often the initiation process is worked out on a journey, which has the effect of accelerating the rate of moral, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual maturation. (Vanderwerken, 2)

Obviously, a number of these markers can be applied to *Moon Palace* and this is also stressed by Paul Auster: "At bottom, I suppose it's a story about families and generation, a kind of *David Copperfield* novel, and it's something that I've been wanting to write for a long time." (Auster, in Mallia) Even Fogg himself compares his own "initiation process" described in the novel with the development of the protagonist in a story by Charles Dickens and ironically remarks: "[...] I apparently moped around a lot and did my fair share of sniffing, sobbing myself to sleep at night like some pathetic orphan hero in a nineteenth-century novel." (Moon Palace, 4) His mocking tone already indicates that Auster at the same time establishes and undermines the conventions of this literary tradition. Although this is also a genuinely postmodern technique, in this respect *Moon Palace* displays features of a modernist Bildungsroman in which the traditional formula is parodied or even inverted.<sup>59</sup> One example may be Auster's interpretation of Fogg's "educational experiences": He indeed learns "through books", if only that selling them doesn't bring enough money to live on it. He also literally makes experiences "on the street" since he is dismissed from his apartment. But these experiences are not the result of courage and active involvement but of his "militant refusal to take any action at all." (Moon Palace, 20) It is thus not a conscious decision to "make his way independently in the city" (Buckley, 17) but the result of not making any decisions. Also the relationship to his father is an ambivalent issue: Like the typical Bildungsroman hero, Fogg is "orphaned or at least fatherless" (Buckley, 19), even in a twofold sense since he loses his uncle Victor and is also ignorant concerning his father's identity. Ironically, by finding a kind of surrogate father, namely Effing, he finally comes to

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<sup>59</sup> See Vanderwerken, 3.

know the biological one, Barber. Apart from that, it can be observed that novels of this literary tradition rarely end with a happy closure but mostly with the hero at the threshold of a new life. Thus the ending of the narrative is also the beginning of something new which is, as already shown, the case in *Moon Palace*. Hence, what these points may demonstrate is that Auster deliberately uses the form of the Bildungsroman as a model for this work. However, comparable to other postmodernist authors, he seems to undermine certain conventions of this genre. It should be noted though that *Moon Palace* cannot be described as satiric anti-Bildungsroman<sup>60</sup> because the hero Fogg indeed “achieves both self-definition in light of a cultural ideal of adulthood as well as a social definition, ready to assume a role in a community” (Vanderwerken, 3) which is a major feature of the Bildungsroman.

The first part of *The Music of Chance* has the form of a classical (American) road story and thus foregrounds major features of picaresque fiction.<sup>61</sup> This genre is rooted in Spanish literature and characterised by the following generic markers: at the centre of the narrative is the picaro or the picara who is – at least temporarily – removed from any particular place and forced to travel through the country. The plot follows the movements of the traveller and consists of a number of disconnected episodes.<sup>62</sup> The opening section of *The Music of Chance* has a similar form, as the action is set mainly on the road and the story constitutes a sequence of accidental occurrences. Jim Nashe may represent the figure of the picaro because, after his wife has left him, he cuts off his connections to the past. Therefore he “turns himself into a *picaro*, abandoning his home and severing his family ties.” (Shiloh, 161) This is underlined by the following passage:

Nashe did not have any definite plan. At most, the idea was to let himself drift for a while, to travel around from place to place and see what happened [...] Little by little, he had fallen in love with his new life of freedom and irresponsibility, and once that happened, there were no longer any reasons to stop. (Music, 10)

Seemingly he put his former life behind himself and lives only in the present. The car becomes the representation of this freedom and a

sanctum of invulnerability, a refuge in which nothing could hurt him anymore. As long as he was driving, he carried no burdens, was unencumbered by even the slightest particle of his former life. (Music, 11)

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<sup>60</sup> See Vanderwerken, 3.

<sup>61</sup> See Shiloh, 161.

<sup>62</sup> See Sherrill, 3.

Apart from losing his wife and abandoning his daughter, he is also literally “orphaned” (Sherrill, 14) as the novel begins with his father’s death and the cosequent inheritance which enables him to begin his journey in the first place. This “orphaned” state is another characteristic of the protagonist of picaresque fiction.<sup>63</sup> In this context, his name appears significant considering the fact that one of the earliest, classic examples of this genre is Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller* from 1594.<sup>64</sup> However, although Jack Pozzi is not the focal figure of the novel, in fact he appears to personify the picaro figure even more strikingly than the rational person Nashe. Pozzi has a poor background and earns his money by playing poker and cheating lesser players, thus by accommodating himself to the circumstances and playing different roles. This corresponds with the description of the picaro who is characterised by his “odd birth or childhood, the ejection from family or community, the skill for and execution of tricks [and] the capacity for role playing.” (Sherrill, 19) This leads to the assumption that this figure is represented by both Nashe and Pozzi. They also share the necessity to improve their financial situation and in spite of being not materialistic, they have to “respect the material order of life for the sake of survival.” (Sherrill, 23) Furthermore, the picaro is an ambiguous character: On the one side, he longs for freedom and independence; on the other side, he yearns to find a home-like place to be and belong and some meaningful and coherent structure in his life.<sup>65</sup> This altogether romantic desire is certainly an aspect of Nashe’s character, too. When he considers Flower’s proposal to let Pozzi and him work off their gaming debt we hear:

If nothing else, perhaps those fifty days would give him a chance to take stock, to sit still for the first time in over a year and ponder his next move. It was almost a relief to have the decision taken out of his hands, to know that he had finally stopped running. The wall would not be a punishment so much as a cure, a one-way journey back to earth. (Music, 100)

Whereas all these instances demonstrate that Auster deliberately uses facets of the picaresque novel in *The Music of Chance*, it is nonetheless obvious that at the same time he subverts these principles. Nashe’s almost naïve belief in freedom and self-determination is not only undermined by comments of others, such as Fiona’s sarcastic statement that America is the “home of the goddamn free” (Music, 15), but also by the depiction of Nashe’s driving.<sup>66</sup> His

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<sup>63</sup> See Sherrill, 14.

<sup>64</sup> See Sherrill, 3.

<sup>65</sup> See Sherrill, 25.

<sup>66</sup> See Shiloh, 167.

ostensible liberty increasingly turns into an obsession. Moreover, his idea to “let himself drift” (Music, 10) is responsible for the necessity to gamble and the horrifying subsequent events. In the second part of the novel the picaresque framework is replaced by the form of the tragedy that is “diametrically opposed to the picaresque” (Shiloh, 168). This underlines Auster’s subversion of the idealised depiction of reality which is a characteristic of picaresque fiction, especially the American road-story.

Regarding the so called fantastic it must be said in advance that nearly all of Auster’s texts feature fantastic elements, whereas it is not always easy to draw a distinction between the fantastic and the fairy tale. Auster accounts for the frequent occurrence of mystery in his novels with the words:

We’re surrounded by things we don’t understand, by mysteries, and in the books there are people who come face to face with them. It becomes more apparent that they’re surrounded by things they don’t know or understand. (Art of Hunger, 262)

Fantasy is a rather fuzzy term and generally hard to define. Nonetheless, there seems to be agreement on the definition of literary fantasy as a

type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic – a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live. As a literary genre, modern fantasy is clearly related to the magical stories of myth, legend, fairy tale, and folklore from all over the world. (Mathews, 1)

Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between the fantastic which may appear in any genre, and Fantasy “to which this fantastic is exhaustively central”. (Rabkin, 29) The fantastic thus may lend itself as framework for Auster’s stories which frequently deal with mystery and wonder. His extensive use of elements of fantastic fiction can be observed rather clearly by the example of *Oracle Night*. As already mentioned, the title evokes the association with Greek mythology. This already hints at the fact that the novel deals, at least to a certain extent, with supernatural occurrences. One example is the blue Portuguese notebook that Orr buys in the stationary store ‘Paper Palace’. He describes the feeling of holding the book in his hands for the first time as “something akin to physical pleasure, a rush of sudden, incomprehensible well-being.” (Oracle Night, 5) The mysterious nature of this item becomes apparent later when Orr seemingly slips into another universe by writing in the book: When his wife Grace returns to their apartment, she is surprised to meet him in the kitchen because, as she explains, she knocked at his working room door several minutes

before. “When you didn’t answer, I opened the door and peeked inside. But you weren’t there.” “Of course I was. I was sitting at my desk.” (Oracle Night, 24) This actually indicates that he has been inside the book. Also his sense of time seems to be affected by the book. He realises that eight pages of it are covered which would “suggest at least two or three hours work, but the time had passed so quickly, I felt as if I’d been in there for only a few minutes.” (Oracle Night, 24) After a second incident of this kind, he declares in a conversation with Trause:

It’s all in my head. I’m not saying it isn’t, but ever since I bought that notebook, everything’s gone out of whack. I can’t tell if I’m the one who’s using the notebook or if the notebook’s been using me. (Oracle Night, 148)

The Portuguese notebook thus is represented as a magic object with mysterious powers and reminds one of Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story* in which Bastian becomes a part of the book he reads.

Strongly connected to this issue is the stationary store in which Orr purchases the notebook. It has been newly opened by a Chinese man named Chang. When Orr wants to visit the store a second time, he finds the spot vacant. The man in the neighbouring bar is also surprised and says: “When I got here this morning, the place was cleaned out. You want weird, my friend, that’s weird. Just like some magician dude waves his magic wand, and poof, the Chinaman is gone.” (Oracle Night, 99) Obviously the author plays with the reader’s expectation since he later provides a truly realistic explanation for Chang’s disappearance.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in Auster’s novels mystery is frequently connected with China. This is not only applicable to *Oracle Night* but to *Moon Palace* as well: Apart from Fogg’s girlfriend, the Chinese girl Kitty Wu, the Asian restaurant Moon Palace plays a major role in the story. It is also, of all places, a hill in Chinatown which Effing falls down and breaks his spine, an incident he interprets as a kind of divine punishment.

A genre that is closely related to fantastic literature is science fiction. In contrast to the former, it is set in a rational universe and the unusual occurrences are subject to futuristic scientific explanation and causality.<sup>68</sup> *Oracle Night* also features elements of this sub-genre. Sydney Orr is supposed to write a screenplay adaptation of H.G. Wells novel *The Time Machine* which he considers a “bad, awkwardly written piece of work, social criticism disguising itself as adventure yarn and heavy-handed on both counts.” (Oracle Night, 108) Orr’s version of this tale is about two time travellers, a man from the past and a woman from

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<sup>67</sup> See Oracle Night, 126.

<sup>68</sup> See Mathews, 4.

the future, who meet each other in the present. In the course of the story they unsuccessfully attempt to prevent the assassination of President Kennedy. The narrative ends with the distortion of the time machines and the two main characters finally “walk off into the morning of November twenty-third, two young people who have renounced their pasts, preparing to face the future together.” Its author sarcastically remarks “it was pure rubbish, of course, fantasy drek of the lowest order”. (Oracle Night, 113) With this statement he may unwittingly comment on the novel as a whole because its protagonists also, in a metaphorical sense, travel through the time. This impression is reinforced by Orr’s statement at the beginning of the book: “I felt like someone who had come home from a long and difficult journey, an unfortunate traveler who had returned to claim his rightful place in the world.” (Oracle Night, 10) Moreover, the last part of *Oracle Night* to a certain extent resembles the Hollywood-like ending of *The Time Machine*: Towards the end of the book Orr declares: “As long as Grace wants me, the past is of no importance.” Subsequently he throws away the blue notebook containing his speculations on the past events. Thus he figuratively “destroy[s] the time machines and bur[ies] them in the meadow.” (Oracle Night, 113) Again, Auster at the same time establishes and subverts the fantastic framework of the novel which further underlines his postmodern approach.

#### **3.1.4. The story in the story**

The narrative technique of embedding one story within another is certainly not an invention of postmodernism. However, such a structure foregrounds what can be called the “ontological dominant” (McHale, 10) of postmodernist fiction and thus it is employed in many of its texts. Central to this ontological model is the assumption that there exist an infinite number of different worlds. One of the essential questions is what happens when these worlds are confronted with each other and “what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world”. (McHale, 10) Although Auster raises this issue in nearly all of his works, he never formulates it more to the point than in *Man in the Dark*. Brick, the protagonist of the story in the story learns that:

There’s no single reality, Corporal. There are many realities. There’s no single world. There are many worlds, and they all run parallel to one another, worlds and anti-worlds, worlds and shadow-worlds, and each world is dreamed or imagined or written by someone in another world. Each world is the creation of a mind.  
(Man in the Dark, 69)

*Moon Palace* basically consists of three interwoven narratives: the memories of Marco Stanley Fogg – which constitutes the so called *diegesis* or primary world (McHale, 113) - his grandfather Thomas Effing and his father Salomon Barber. Fogg's name already suggests that one of the novel's central issues is story-telling. He says:

When I was fifteen, I began signing all my papers M.S. Fogg, pretentiously echoing the gods of modern literature, but at the same time delighting in the fact that the initial stood for *manuscript*. Uncle Victor approved of this about-face. "Every man is the author of his own life", he said. "The book you are writing is not yet finished. Therefore, it's a manuscript [...]" (Moon Palace, 7)

Fogg understands his life as a "white page of uncertainty". This underlines the interaction between writing and living because the novel as a whole constitutes a retrospective report of Fogg's younger self retelling his own story. The first embedded narrative - or "*hypodiegetic* world" (McHale, 113) - begins when he meets, by mere accident, Effing, his grandfather, as he will learn at the end of the book, who wants him to write his obituary. This way, he explains, at last he wants to tell the "real story" (Moon Palace, 126) for he is convinced to die soon. Up to this moment, he has never done that and savoured to invent an alternative past by making up several stories, "each one an improvement on the ones that came before it ...[I was] embellishing an incident here, perfecting a detail there, toying with them over the years until I got them just right." (Moon Palace, 126) This also affects his credibility and Fogg states that his grandfather's narrative had taken on a "phantasmagoric quality" (Moon Palace, 178). Nevertheless, he admits that "the very outrageousness of the story was probably its most convincing element" (Moon Palace, 178) which underlines that the boundary between fiction and reality is blurred and, even more important, that something like *the* truth doesn't exist and instead only many possible truths. Fogg's girlfriend Kitty "summed up the whole complicated problem" and states: "his facts might not always have been correct, but he was telling the truth." (Moon Palace, 269)

The second embedded, or "Chinese box"- story (McHale, 112), is Salomon Barber's account of his childhood and of the affair with Fogg's mother Emily. Barber is also the author of academic history books and a novel with the title *Kepler's Blood* that he wrote at the age of seventeen. It is based on the mysterious disappearance of his father. Since this narrative is also retold, it occupies a level below Barber's story, in other words, it is a story-in-the-story-in-the-story. However, one can easily distinguish between the respective levels, so that there appears to be no "ontological discontinuity" (McHale, 113). The example of

*Kepler's Blood* clearly demonstrates that each sub-narrative of *Moon Palace* mirrors the novel as a whole. Fogg, for instance, remarks that “everything in Barber’s book happens by chance” (*Moon Palace*, 255), which ironically alludes to his own report. Moreover, he describes his father’s work as “a complex dance of guilt and desire. Desire turns into guilt, and then, because this guilt is intolerable, it becomes a desire to expiate itself, to submit to a cruel and inexorable form of justice.” (*Moon Palace*, 256) Thus its content reflects not only Barber’s experiences but also Fogg’s search for his father and, on the highest level, Auster’s real life.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, it is disclosed that Barber’s nationally acclaimed scholarly works explored many of these issues so that there was “always a personal motive behind” (*Moon Palace*, 256) them. This may indicate that historiographic representation, fiction and reality have to be put on the same uncertain ground.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to *Moon Palace* and *Oracle Night*, *The Music of Chance* contains no novel-in-the-novel or nested narrative. Nonetheless, Stone’s model of the ‘City of the World’ could be labelled as a world-within-the-world. This underlines the ontological aspect of the book. Stone refers to the ‘City’ as “the way I’d like the world to look. Everything in it happens at once”. His friend Flower adds:

it’s an artistic vision of mankind. In one way, it’s an autobiography, but in another way, it’s what you might call a utopia – a place where the past and future come together, where good finally triumphs over evil [...] many of the figures actually represent Willie himself [...] That’s what you might call the private backdrop, the personal material, the inner component. But all these things are put in a larger context [...] (*Music*, 72)

This larger context is the millionaires’ vision of a perfect society, a totalitarian system governed by social and political control. On the one hand, the model is a representation of the fictional world, an “icon” (Mc Hale, 125) that stands for the story as a whole. On the other hand, what is theorized in the model is applied practically to reality: like the prisoners in the model-city, Nashe and Pozzi are unjustly punished and forced to erect a gigantic wall. Hence, the representation within the fictional world is “spilling over [...] into the reality of that world”. (Shiloh, 195) The interference of one (fictional) sphere by another, however, seems to work both ways: later in the novel, Nashe imagines that

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<sup>69</sup> See Shiloh, 131.

<sup>70</sup> See Weisenburger, 136.



he was already living inside the model. Flower and Stone would look down on him then, and he would suddenly be able to see himself through their eyes - as if he were no larger than a thumb, a little gray mouse darting back and forth in his cage. (Music, 163)

One can observe the ontological “Chinese box” structure of infinite regress within the “City of the World”. Stone wants to complete it by adding a small-scale model of the house itself and consequently also a “second city to fit inside the room within the room.” This, as Nashe observes, would require the construction of an “even smaller model of that model. A model of the model of the model. It could go on forever.” (Music, 73) This would indicate that the primary level of the novel, the fictional reality of the millionaires’ house and mansion, is a mere illusion, too. This impression is underlined by Nashe’s feeling when he approaches their property: he perceives “an abrupt and radical shift of his inner bearings, as if the world around him had suddenly lost its reality.” (Music, 59-60) It thus seems to be merely a simulation, or, in Baudrillard’s terms, “hyperreality” that describes an “intensified version of reality with which the original cannot compete because representation has subsumed the original.” (Barone, 9) All of these aspects foreground the postmodern quality of the novel.

Similar to *Moon Palace*, one of the central themes of *Oracle Night* is story-telling and writing. This is even more so since not only the main character Orr but also his best friend Trause are professional writers. Curiously, the first embedded narrative in *Oracle Night* is actually the further development of another story within the story, namely the Flitcraft episode in Hammet’s *The Maltese Falcon*. Orr plans to use the basic idea of this episode in order to overcome the writer’s block resulting from his accident: “I decided to give the old Flitcraft episode a shot. It was no more than an excuse, a search for a possible way in [...] at least I could call it a beginning.” (Oracle Night, 13) The main character of his “Flitcraftian tale” (Oracle Night, 22) is Nick Bowen who works as an editor. The story opens with the arrival of a manuscript on Bowen’s desk. It bears the title *Oracle Night* and is written by the popular novelist Sylvia Maxwell. Comparable to *Kepler’s Blood*, this manuscript constitutes the “hypo-hypodiegetic world” (McHale, 113) two levels “down” from the primary narrative. Apart from the identical title, the fictional *Oracle Night* mirrors the actual novel since time and memory are the leitmotifs of both works. It is “supposed to be a brief philosophical novel about predicting the future, a fable about time.” (Oracle Night, 55) Orr, and thus Auster, self-consciously points at this recursive structure:

First, Nick's story; then, [his wife] Eva's story; and finally the book that Nick reads and continues to read as their stories unfold: the story within the story. Nick is a literary man, after all, and therefore someone susceptible to the power of books. Little by little [...] he begins to see a connection between himself and the story in the novel, as if in some oblique, highly metaphorical way, the book were speaking intimately to him about his own present circumstances. (Oracle Night, 54-55)

The fictional world of the Flitcraft episode begins to increasingly penetrate Orr's own reality. Things come to the point where, apparently, he is 'drawn into' the story and literally vanishes when he is writing at it. Moreover, when he visits his friend Trause he speaks of a state of "double consciousness" which he explains as follows:

"[...] I wasn't absent. I was there, fully engaged in what was happening, and at the same time I wasn't there – for the there wasn't an authentic there anymore. It was an illusory place that existed in my head, and that's where I was as well. In both places at the same time. In the apartment and in the story. In the story in the apartment that I was still writing in my head." (Oracle Night, 26-27)

However, the narrative ends abruptly with the description of Nick Bowen who is locked in an underground room because Orr cannot find a plausible solution for this problem.

Significantly, it is nearly the same room that occurs later in Grace's dream in which she and her husband are imprisoned in a basement chamber. To use a term by Gerard Genette, such a "violation of narrative levels" could be denoted as "metalepsis" (Mc Hale, 120).

Besides the Flitcraft tale, *Oracle Night* contains a number of other nested stories. Some of them are only mentioned briefly: In one of the numerous footnotes, Orr refers to a film adaptation of one of his short-stories with the title *Tabula Rasa*. This is reminiscent of his real-life circumstances and so he describes it as a "prophetic story". (Oracle Night, 105)

Another story-in-the-story is the screenplay rewriting of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. The name of the text already indicates that it takes up again the motif of time. Hence, it may be seen as a small-scale model of the novel as a whole.

Orr's reflections on the events prior to his accident underline most clearly the link between reality and fiction. Like most of Auster's texts, this one begins with the "moral case: what if...?" (Barone, 11) Orr states that he "felt strong enough to entertain the darkest, most unsettling possibilities. Imagine this, I said to myself. Imagine this, and then see what comes of it." (Oracle Night, 189) He speculates about an affair between Trause and his wife and concludes: "I don't know if it's fact or fiction, but in the end I don't care." This points at the

complex connection between imagination and fact, in other words, the problematic notion of truth. Referring to the poems by the American author William Bronk, Auster writes:

[...] there is no inherent order or truth to the world, that whatever form or shape we feel it possesses is the one we ourselves have imposed on it. We can speak not only of the world, but rather a world, our world, and it is constantly changing as we change. (Art of Hunger, 134)

Finally, it is striking that *Oracle Night* contains a number of extensive footnotes. They could be understood as still another embedded story because these notes sometimes occupy more space on the page than the main-text and frequently exceed the extent of a common reference. At first sight, they might convey the impression to be footnotes by Auster rather than Orr which underscores the complex and unstable structure of the novel. It is a characteristic feature of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction”, too, in which such “paratextual conventions of historiography [are used] to both undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations.” (Hutcheon in Perloff, 71)

#### **3.1.4.1. The representation of history as collection**

The way historical facts are represented is obviously important in a discussion of the complex relationship between fictional and non-fictional worlds. This connection is stressed in *Moon Palace* in which the narrator Fogg repeatedly points towards the fact that his personal story must be seen in the historical context. Referring to events such as the Black Panther trial, the second moon landing and the improbable winning streak of the Mets he observes:

Causality was no longer the hidden demiurge that ruled the universe: down was up, the last was the beginning. Heraclitus had been resurrected from his dung heap, and what he had to show us was the simplest of truths: reality was a yo-yo, change was the only constant. (Moon Palace, 61)

Fogg’s struggles appear to be a miniature version of the dramatic changes the (American) society underwent in those days. The collection of books his uncle Victor hands over to Fogg contributes to this impression because already the number of volumes is significant. Victor says:

When I counted them this afternoon, there were one thousand four hundred and ninety-two volumes. A propitious number, I think, since it evokes the memory of Columbus's discovery of America, and the college you're going to was named after Columbus. Some of these books are big, some are small, some are fat, some are thin – but all of them contain words. (Moon Palace, 12)

These books may represent Victor's personal past as well as the history of America. Hence, this passage foregrounds the link between Fogg's life story, the “*reality* of the past [and] its (only) textualized accessibility to us today” (Hutcheon in Perloff, 64). This is a defining characteristic of postmodern historiographic metafiction.

A further, but somewhat different, representation of history is Flower's collection of “historical memorabilia” in *The Music of Chance*. The millionaires' collection is an accumulation of tokens that once belonged to historical characters, for example Nathaniel Hawthorne's cane or the telephone of Woodrow Wilson. Nashe describes it as a “monument to trivia”. (Music, 75) Later he is stunned by the fact that he remembers most of the objects although they were

all so random, so misconstrued, so utterly beside the point. Flower's museum was a graveyard of shadows, a demented shrine to the spirit of nothingness [...] It had nothing to do with history, nothing to do with the men who had once owned them. The fascination was simply for the objects as material things, and the way they had been wrenched out of any possible context, condemned by Flower to go on existing for no reason at all: defunct, devoid of purpose, alone in themselves now for the rest of time. (Music, 76)

The museum demonstrates Flower's attempt to ‘possess’ history and to reduce its meaning to matter.<sup>71</sup> Due to his wealth he is in the position to do this and in the same way he and his friend dehumanise Nashe and Pozzi after the poker play. Another aspect that underlines this materialistic understanding of history is the wall in the meadow. The stones it is built of are taken from a historical object, an old Irish castle. They are used for the construction of an enormous wall in the middle of a secluded meadow, thus transformed into something meaningless. Like the items of the museum, the stones are “wrenched” out of context and have lost their purpose. It can be argued that they constitute “signifiers that have acquired the status of signifieds” (Shiloh, 187) because they don't refer to a larger context - history – but only to themselves. Moreover, Stone's possession of historical memorabilia and the meaningless wall may indicate that historical knowledge depends on the representation by

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<sup>71</sup> See Shiloh, 187.

those in power. Such a condition is radically contested by the authors of “historiographic metafiction”.<sup>72</sup>

*Oracle Night* features this aspect of postmodern fiction as well. Nick Bowen, the protagonist of the Flitcraft story discussed above, encounters an old man who calls himself Ed Victory. The man offers Nick to work in his “Bureau of Historical Preservation” which is “in the nature of a museum, a private archive.” (Oracle Night, 66) It turns out to be an underground storeroom filled with bookshelves in which Victory collects “hundreds of telephone books, thousands of telephone books, arranged alphabetically by city and set out in chronological order.” (Oracle Night, 80) The old man seems to have started with his work in 1946 as the collection is complete from this year on until the ‘present’ year 1982. Apart from the big American cities, it comprises books from foreign countries and even the Warsaw phone directory from 1937/38. Nick remarks that “nearly every Jewish person listed in that book is long dead – murdered before Ed’s collection was ever started.” (Oracle Night, 81) For Victory the “Bureau of Historical Preservation” is a means to come to terms with his experiences during the Second World War:

This room contains the world, Ed replies. Or at least a part of it. The names of the living and the dead. The Bureau of Historical Preservation is a house of memory, but it’s also a shrine to the present. By bringing those two things together in one place, I prove to myself that mankind isn’t finished. (Oracle Night, 82)

Hence, what is represented here is the viewpoint of the so called “ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (Hutcheon in Perloff, 63) and also of historical reality. Victory’s collection thus constitutes the opposite of Flower’s archive because the items obviously have no material value but personal and historical meaning.

### **3.1.5. Chance and fate**

Generally, it can be observed that the novels of Paul Auster are dominated by the two opposed principles of chance and fate. This has always been a point of critique, too, so that some critics accused Auster of using coincidence as a mere plot device. Referring to these statements, however, he claims that “the introduction of chance elements in fiction probably creates as many problems as it solves. [...] In the strictest sense of the word, I consider

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<sup>72</sup> See Hutcheon in Perloff, 63.

myself a realist.” He actually understands contingency as a part of reality as “we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives” (*Art of Hunger*, 269) Hence, it is not a narrative tool to “smooth things over” (*Art of Hunger*, 270), as Larry McCaffery puts it, but an inherent theme of his novels.

*Moon Palace* is no exception to this rule because its plot relies to a great extent on contingent occurrences, which are generally a frequent component of literary postmodernism.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, the novel also seems to be dominated by the concept of fate. Apparently, these two principles even interact with, rather than contradict, each other. One example is the way Fogg comes upon his position as “live-in companion” for the “[e]lderly gentleman” (*Moon Palace*, 94) Effing, his own grandfather: He discovers the advertisement by pure chance on a bulletin board at the student employment office. Fogg gets the position but as it turns out, he had been the only applicant anyhow. Hence, the ostensible coincidence leads to the fulfilment of his fate. This sense of predetermination is also evoked by the fact that the life stories of Fogg, his father and his grandfather mirror each other in many respects.<sup>74</sup> It has been argued though that “chance and coincidence name the counterforces working against inheritance and genealogy in Auster’s novels” (Weisenburger, 130) Indeed, they could be rather interpreted as two sides of the same coin than “counterforces”. A further example may underline this argument: At his first encounter with Kitty Wu, Fogg wears a T-shirt of the Baseball-team Mets in spite of being supporter of the Cubs. The shirt happens to look much alike Kitty’s, which a friend of hers considers to be a “weird coincidence”. In the course of the conversation, however, Fogg is repeatedly referred to as “Kitty’s twin brother” (*Moon Palace*, 34). Moreover, she is the person who saves his life and thus, looking back at that time, Fogg states at the beginning of the novel: “I had met her by chance only a short time before, but eventually I came to see that chance as a form of readiness, a way of saving myself through the mind of others.” (*Moon Palace*, 1) Fogg’s philosophy, and probably also Auster’s, is that the individual has to seize the chance of such accidental occurrences because they determine human existence. Auster calls this the

powers of contingency. Our lives don’t really belong to us, you see- they belong to the world, and in spite of our efforts to make sense of it, the world is a place beyond our understanding. We brush up against these mysteries all the time.  
(*Art of Hunger*, 271)

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<sup>73</sup> See Martin, 41.

<sup>74</sup> See Shiloh, 128.

This sense of mystery and fate also affects the structure of the book. Like Fogg, who feels that his “life was under the protection of benevolent spirits” (Moon Palace, 52) the whole story appears to be already predetermined at the beginning. Firstly, Fogg’s name is associated with the major themes of the novel, namely travelling, writing and also the question of origin. Apart from that, most of the essential elements of the story – except Fogg and Effing’s family relation - are summed up in the first paragraph of the book. Hence, the question is not so much *what* will happen as *how*.

Besides the forces of contingency and fate, there is a third aspect that should not be overlooked, namely self-determinism. Apparently, these three principles interact in such a way that the protagonists, especially Fogg, tend to confuse them. As a result of his refusal to work Fogg has to leave his apartment and is forced to live in the Central Park. He states:

I was half-dead from hunger, but whenever something good happened to me, I did not attribute it to chance so much as to a special state of mind. If I was able to maintain the proper balance between desire and indifference, I felt that I could somehow will the universe to respond to me [...] I began to notice that good things happened to me only when I stopped wishing for them [...] In other words, you got what you wanted only by not wanting it. (Moon Palace, 57)

Although he admits that it was the “incomprehensibility of the argument” that appealed to him, the statement underlines the complex relation between self-determination, chance and fate. Another striking example is Effing’s prediction of his own death. Two months in advance, the old man foretells the date of his demise which is May 12. Significantly, he dies exactly two minutes past midnight on that day which Fogg considers “preposterous”. (Moon Palace, 215) In regard to narrative technique, this prediction can be seen as an additional element of suspense which stresses the mysterious mood of the novel. Hence, the motif of the omen, be it good or bad, seems to function as some sort of narrative device. A similar example is Fogg’s fortune cookie, which he gets after a dinner in the Chinese restaurant “Moon Palace”. It contains a paper with the words: “The sun is the past, the earth is the present, the moon is the future.” and Fogg says:

As it turned out, I was to encounter this enigmatic phrase again, which in retrospect made it seem that my chance discovery of it in the Moon Palace had been fraught with a weird and premonitory truth. (Moon Palace, 94)

More than one hundred pages later, Fogg discovers the same phrase in a copy of Tesla's autobiography. Tesla played an important role in his grandfather's life. Thus he remarks that

[t]he synchronicity of these events seemed fraught with significance, but it was difficult for me to grasp precisely how [...] It was a node of impenetrability, and it seemed that nothing but some crackpot solution could account for it: strange conspiracies of matter, precognitive signs, premonitions, a view of the world similar to Charlie Bacon's. (Moon Palace, 227)

Subsequently he begins to write an essay about the question of coincidence but, as he ironically adds, "[a]s chance would have it" never finishes it. This points out that chance and fate are not only essential themes of the novel but also structural features to create a sense of suspension.

It may be needless to state that coincidence is a pivotal element of *The Music of Chance*, but at the same time, the title seems to allude to the principle of fate: the term music is mostly associated with coherence and harmony; therefore it signifies the opposite of chaos and randomness. The title thus appears paradoxical as it combines two contradictory concepts. Apparently, exactly this paradox is foregrounded in *The Music of Chance* which becomes clear already on the first page of the book. One can find there a listing of accidental events such as Nashe's unexpected inheritance and his random encounter with Jack Pozzi, but at the centre of the page we hear: "it all came down to a question of sequence, the order of events" (Music, 1) which suggests that contingency is an inevitable part of destiny. This philosophy seems to dominate the whole narrative.

The tension between determinism and randomness also defines its structure and, comparable to Auster's other works, it is never resolved.<sup>75</sup> This discrepancy between – or rather the paradoxical connection of – these forces is represented by the two parts of the book. The first one foregrounds the motif of chance as it describes Nashe's aimless journey through America by which he opens himself up to the unpredictable aspect of life.<sup>76</sup> For instance, he plans to travel to Massachusetts but finds himself driving in the opposite direction because he misses the first ramp to the freeway and

impulsively went up the next ramp, knowing full well that he had just committed himself to the wrong road. It was a sudden, unpremeditated decision, but in the

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<sup>75</sup> See Shiloh, 159.

<sup>76</sup> See Shiloh, 160.



brief time that elapsed between the two ramps, Nashe understood that there was no difference, that both ramps were finally the same. (Music, 5)

In some sense, this also confirms his almost nihilistic attitude at the beginning of his journey because the assumption that all decisions are equivalent presumes the ideology that the world is devoid of meaning and purpose.<sup>77</sup> His solitude though is broken when he encounters the journalist Fiona Wells who had once written an article about him and “like most of the things that happened to him that year, it came about purely by chance.” (Music, 13) Similar to that, Nashe’s first meeting with Jack Pozzi is referred to as “one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air – a twig that breaks off in the wind and suddenly lands at his feet.” (Music, 1)

The poker-game between Pozzi and the two millionaires perhaps functions as the transition from the first, chance-governed part to the second in which fate is the dominant force. Whereas poker is a game based on luck, it also requires great abilities and talent so that it signifies a combination of contingency and agency. Moreover, the most tantalizing question remains whether the loss in this game was due to bad luck, or the millionaires’ cheating. Hence, *The Music of Chance* “deals with the perennial postmodern anxiety of neurosis and paranoia about the extent to which everything is plotless or totally plotted” (Woods, 149) These two opposing concepts are represented by the main characters Nashe and Pozzi, too: After Nashe’s confession that, during the game, he had stolen the figures of Flower and Stone, his friend says:

We had everything in harmony. We’d come to the point where everything was turning into music for us, and then you have to go upstairs and smash all the instruments. You tampered with the universe, my friend, and once a man does that, he’s got to pay the price. (Music, 126)

This indicates that Pozzi believes in metaphysical forces beyond human control and understanding whereas Nashe is characterised as rational and pragmatic. He replies:

[...]You want to believe in some hidden purpose. You’re trying to persuade yourself there’s a reason for what happens in the world. I don’t care what you call it – God or luck or harmony – it all comes down to the same bullshit. It’s a way of avoiding the facts, of refusing to look at how things really work. (Music, 126-127)

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<sup>77</sup> See Shiloh, 163.

The millionaires Flower and Stone are in turn associated with the power of destiny. Apparently, they personify fate which is stressed by the fact that the doorbell of their house chimes with the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, known as the "Destiny" symphony.<sup>78</sup> In this context it is also significant that the numbers with which they won the lottery jackpot were prime numbers. They chose them deliberately since, according to them, such numbers would "refuse to cooperate" (Music, 67). Therefore it appears as if Flower and Stone successfully interfered with the laws of contingency.

The second part, beginning with the card game, is governed by a sense of ruthless determination. In contrast to Pozzi, however, who cannot accept the course of events until the end, Nashe seems to expect or even welcome their unjust punishment. He understands the game as a turning point in his life and perhaps foresees the future events as the

thought of winning struck him as too easy, as something that would happen too quickly and naturally to bear any permanent consequences [...] How would he act if the money were lost? The strange thing was not that he was able to imagine this possibility but that he could do so with such indifference and detachment, with so little inner pain. (Music, 54)

This passivity may be symptomatic of his acceptance of chance and, in further consequence, of his fate.<sup>79</sup> In Nashe's eyes the incarceration is the end product of the loss in the game which is in turn the consequence of taking a risk, thus he refuses to blame external forces. In regard to the structure of *The Music of Chance* it can be added that the (probable) death of Pozzi indeed seems to be predetermined. Prior to his first encounter with Nashe he nearly has been beaten to death and later presumably dies exactly this way. This confirms that in Auster's novels chance and fate also have the function of formal features.

As the author doesn't clear up the question whether it was agency – the millionaires' cheating – or pure luck that led to the subsequent events, it becomes clear that this is not the central issue of the novel. Auster is rather concerned with the ways in which different individuals react on such unaccountable events.<sup>80</sup> Obviously, he professes himself unable to provide an explanation for the "utterly bewildering nature of human experience." (Art of Hunger, 270) Hence, in his narratives he portrays individuals who "brush up against these mysteries all the time." (Art of Hunger, 271)

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<sup>78</sup> See Shiloh, 183.

<sup>79</sup> See Martin, 61.

<sup>80</sup> See Martin, 66.

Comparable to *The Music of Chance*, already the title of *Oracle Night* indicates that fate will play a significant role in the book. The term oracle is mostly associated with Greek mythology in which fate is not personified but declared through the words of the oracle.<sup>81</sup> The title foreshadows that the prediction of future events and the interpretation of signs are the leitmotifs of the novel, even more as the embedded narrative of the same name is concerned with these topics, too. Again, the concept of fate is inextricably connected with the role of coincidence. One can observe this most clearly in the afore-mentioned Flitcraft episode since its initial point is nothing else than an accident. The protagonist of Hammet's original story walks down a street and is nearly hit by a falling beam. He recognises that the "world is governed by chance. Randomness stalks us every day of our lives, and those lives can be taken from us at any moment – for no reason at all." (*Oracle Night*, 12) This could even remind one of the tragic death of Ödön von Horvath who was killed by a falling tree branch during a short thunderstorm when he was walking down the Champs-Élysées in Paris.<sup>82</sup> However, Flitcraft decides to leave the city and start a new life. Orr adopts this anecdote as a starting-point for his own story about a man called Nick Bowen. It is interesting that here, as in most of Auster's novels, downwards movement is equivalent with chance. This is itself no coincidence because the word "chance" originates from the Latin *cadere*, which means "to fall"<sup>83</sup>. It is also frequently associated with the fall of the dice so that it constitutes a radical turning point in the life of the protagonists.<sup>84</sup> That is also the case in *Moon Palace*, in which Effing falls down a steep street and breaks his spine. The falling gargoyle head that almost kills Bowen, though, seems to mean something slightly different than the beam in Hammet's tale: After the accident Bowen realises that

he should be dead. The stone was meant to kill him. He left his apartment tonight for no other reason than to run into that stone, and if he's managed to escape with his life, it can only mean that a new life has been given to him – that his old life is finished, that every moment of his past now belongs to someone else.  
(*Oracle Night*, 23)

This passage indicates that the stone signifies Bowen's destiny, as it was "meant to kill him", and not the "randomness" which "stalks us every day." Bowen is forced to react to this chance event, to "accept what's happening, accept it and actively embrace it." (*Oracle Night*, 85) This replaces the need to come to a decision between his wife Eva and Rosa Leightman,

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<sup>81</sup> See Shiloh, 182.

<sup>82</sup> See Lunzer, 155.

<sup>83</sup> See Shiloh, 2.

<sup>84</sup> See Shiloh, 134.

to whom he feels attracted. The protagonist, like Hammet's Flitcraft, resolves to leave his home town and chooses Kansas City for his destination. This is "an arbitrary choice", as Orr remarks in a footnote. Some time later, however, he remembers the Hyatt Regency catastrophe – an incident that actually took place in Kansas City – in which more than one hundred people were killed when the walkways came loose from the ceiling and *fell down*. This may demonstrate that contingency is an integral part of what is generally conceived as destiny. Hence, the latter should not be understood as a meaningful, causal design directing human actions but rather as the (chaotic) condition of things as they are.<sup>85</sup> In this respect, Orr's perception of fate echoes the reflections of Quinn, the protagonist of *City of Glass*. A further example of the "powers of contingency" (Art of Hunger, 271) is connected to the mysterious blue notebook. Orr claims that, from the number of available books in the store, he chose the blue one because it "happened to be the one lying on top." (Oracle Night, 5) The role of this item becomes clear in the further course of the narrative. This is a typical feature of Auster's texts because its purchase is an event that has "no a priori meaning, but to which the story gives unexpected consequences." (Bruckner, 29)

Comparable to Fogg and Nashe Orr's future appears predetermined as well. At the end of the novel, Sydney Orr recapitulates the events previous to his accident. Finally, he concludes:

I was a lost man, an ill man, a man struggling to regain his footing, but underneath all the missteps and follies I committed that week, I knew something I wasn't aware of knowing. At certain moments during those days, I felt as if my body had become transparent [...] I suspect that condition was what led to the birth of Lamuel Flagg, the blind hero of *Oracle Night*, a man so sensitive to the vibrations around him that he knew what was going to happen before the events themselves took place. I didn't know, but every thought that entered my head was pointing me in that direction. [...] The future was already inside me, and I was preparing myself for the disasters that were about to come. (Oracle Night, 199)

Orr shares this attitude with most of Auster's characters who have the task to decipher the signs, to be "sensitive to the vibrations around" them. Hence, in order to master their life, they need to face their destiny and actively respond to it. In other words, they must recognise that

[n]oting the signs that fate strews along our path is the only way to combat the arbitrary: suddenly, in the randomness of existence, a certain order appears just

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<sup>85</sup> See Sorapure, 82.

below the surface, an order which seems mysteriously to control us. (Bruckner, 29)

This stresses the assumption that in the novels of Paul Auster the external forces chance and fate neither contradict each other nor the concept of self-determination. On the contrary, only when his characters are willing to recognise them as elements of their life and act self-responsible according to it, they are finally able to reach their goal.

### 3.1.6. The “zero”

A further element that characterises numerous works of Paul Auster is the continual deterioration of an individual or, seen in a larger context, of human society. Examples of this nihilistic “ideology of the zero”<sup>86</sup> are the total loss of identity in the three parts of *The New York Trilogy*, the apocalyptic situation of the urban environment in *In the Country of Last Things* and Sachs’s abandonment of his former life due to his obsessive behaviour in *Leviathan*.<sup>87</sup> Such a pattern can be found in each of the three discussed novels, too.

The most striking instance of what can be called ‘reaching the zero’ in *Moon Palace* is Fogg’s self-induced starvation in the first part of the book. The similarities between this episode and Hamsun’s novel *Hunger* are obvious: An intelligent, literate young man at once decides to stop eating “not because he has to, but from some inner compulsion, as if to wage a hunger strike against himself.” (Art of Hunger, 12) In his essay “The Art of Hunger” Auster describes Hamsun’s hero as “a monster of intellectual arrogance” (Art of Hunger, 11) and stresses that he does not fast for philosophical, artistic or religious reasons. His refusal to eat should be understood instead as a paradoxical self-experiment: “To persist in it would mean death, and with death the fast would end. He must therefore stay alive, but only to the extent that it keeps him on the point of death.” (Art of Hunger, 13) Similarly, Fogg is a student who “had thought too much and read too many books” (Moon Palace, 20) which points out the rational aspect of his character. He finds himself in a precarious financial situation after the death of his uncle. Instead of earning money by working for it he consciously decides to do nothing. Hence, his

action would consist of a militant refusal to take any action at all. This was nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition. I would turn my life into a work of art, sacrificing myself to such exquisite paradoxes that every breath I took

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<sup>86</sup> See Slocombe, 131.

<sup>87</sup> See Wirth, 174.

would teach me how to savor my own doom. The signs pointed to a total eclipse [...] I would do nothing to thwart the inevitable, but neither would I rush out to meet it. (Moon Palace, 20)

The only money at his disposal is what he gets by pawning the books he inherited from his uncle:

My life had become a gathering zero, and it was a thing I could actually see: a palpable, burgeoning emptiness. [...] I was both perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theater of one. I could follow the progress of my own dismemberment. Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear. (Moon Palace, 24)

Fogg has to put himself on a very strict diet and very soon he is deprived of electricity and his telephone connection, which leads to complete social isolation. Thus his 'quest' is largely ignored by the environment<sup>88</sup> which underlines the parallels between him and the protagonist of Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* whose "performances are therefore not spectacles for the amusement of others, but the unravelling of a private despair." (Art of Hunger, 19) Nevertheless, the latter at least permits others to watch him. Fogg, by contrast, increasingly loses contact to the outer world and also to himself because, due to his starvation, he is tortured by hallucinations. Although his physical condition is life-endangering, he is not able to counteract in any way which may be the result of his deeply pessimistic worldview. Apparently, he has arrived at the conclusion that life is meaningless, which has led to a feeling of deep despair. This "existential nihilism" (Slocombe, 6) is expressed in statements such as: "I would be patient, I would hold fast. It was simply that I knew what was in store for me, and whether it happened today, or whether it happened tomorrow, it would nevertheless happen." (Moon Palace, 20) The main reason for this highly negative attitude is probably the death of his uncle Victor who advocates the existentialist doctrine and seemingly also represents it in the novel.<sup>89</sup> Only after Fogg is discarded from his apartment and forced to live in the Central Park, he realises his dependence on others: "I never asked anyone for anything, I never budged from my spot, and yet strangers were continually coming up to me and giving me help." (Moon Palace, 57) Finally he is rescued by his best friend David Zimmer and his later girlfriend Kitty Wu. Summing up his experiences Fogg remarks:

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<sup>88</sup> See Martin, 73.

<sup>89</sup> See Martin, 72.

I had jumped off the edge of a cliff, and then, just as I was about to hit bottom, an extraordinary event took place: I learned that there were people who loved me. To be loved like that makes all the difference. It does not lessen the terror of fall, but it gives a new perspective on what that terror means. (Moon Palace, 49)

This statement indicates that what Fogg actually inherited from his uncle is his existentialist philosophy since he has learned to accept the “nothingness” (Slocombe, 7) of the universe and at the same time his responsibility for himself and others. The ‘zero’, he recognises, does not lead to the end of existence; on the contrary, he acknowledges that “nothingness is the point from which being begins to exist ‘for-itself.’” (Slocombe, 7) He seems to have gained some insight through the fast and stresses this also in a conversation with the army psychiatrist:

[...] The point was to accept things as they were, to drift along with the flow of the universe. I’m not saying that I managed to do this very well. I failed miserably, in fact. But failure doesn’t vitiate the sincerity of the attempt. If I came close to dying, I nevertheless believe that I’m a better person for it.  
(Moon Palace, 78)

His complete refusal to act thus should not be misunderstood as an attempt to commit suicide but as a strategy to cope with the “manifold contingencies” (Moon Palace, 78) that determine human life. Hence, the term hunger appears to be ambiguous because, on the one hand, it describes a state of physical deficiency; but on the other hand, the “art of hunger” is the urge to overcome this deficiency and an “art of need, of necessity, of desire.” (Art of Hunger, 18) Apparently, Auster’s protagonists almost get to the point of ‘zero’ and “watch [themselves] disappear” (Moon Palace, 24) in order to transform their life and to begin a new existence. Such a philosophy is also expressed at the end of Auster’s essay about the French high-wire artist Petit: “High-wire walking is not an art of death, but an art of life – and life lived to the very extreme of life. Which is to say, life that does not hide from death, but stares it straight in the face.” (Art of Hunger, 250) It may be a significant detail in this context that the name of Effing’s former secretary and best friend, whose position Fogg later assumes, is Pavel Shum since ‘shum’ is the Hebrew word for ‘nothing’.<sup>90</sup>

The decay of Fogg’s body may be also symptomatic of the dissolution of the social system.<sup>91</sup> Historical events such as the Apollo moon landing and the violent suppression of the student protests by the police are mirrored in Fogg’s development. He claims: “My own story stands in the rubble of those days, and unless this fact is understood, none of it will

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<sup>90</sup> See Shiloh, 135.

<sup>91</sup> See Weisenburger, 130.

make sense.” (Moon Palace, 25) These parallels even indicate that change, both individual and social, necessarily requires the complete transformation of old structures.

Apparently, this is also the underlying philosophy of *The Music of Chance*. In this novel, the concept of “nothingness” and the relevance of the number zero is even more prominent. Comparable to the death of Victor in *Moon Palace*, this narrative begins with a turning point in the life of the protagonist. Jim Nashe is left by his wife Therese and consequently his sister has to take charge of the two-year-old daughter Juliette. Nashe moves out of the house and at first throws away his wife’s belongings, “finally getting rid of her in a systematic purge” (Music, 9) but when he has finished, he succeeds to do the same with his own possessions:

Nashe acted with the same brutal thoroughness, treating his past as if it were so much junk to be carted away [...] There was a certain pain involved in these transactions, but Nashe almost began to welcome that pain, to feel ennobled by it, as if the farther he took himself away from the person he had been, the better off he would be in the future. He felt like a man who had finally found the courage to put a bullet through his head – but in his case the bullet was not death, it was life, it was the explosion that triggers the birth of new worlds. (Music, 9)

According to him, self-annihilation leads to what could be called ‘re-birth’. Similar to Fogg’s starving he craves oblivion and begins to drive aimlessly through America. Thus he pushes himself to the limits and is “acting as though he meant to punish himself into new barriers of endurance.” (Music, 17) Seemingly, despair and the wish to lose himself are the main motivations for his driving, but actually this is mixed with a feeling of freedom and exhilaration.<sup>92</sup> Nashe begins to accept the contingency and absurdity of life, to “follow his nose” (Music, 57), which has a liberating effect on him. As Pozzi explains, this makes him a member of the “International Brotherhood of lost Dogs” with the “[s]erial number zero zero zero”. This is also Pozzi’s own code because “[t]hat’s one of the beauties of the Brotherhood. Everyone who joins gets the same number.” (Music, 57) The nothingness, in the form of the number zero, is omnipresent in the second section of the novel, too. After losing their money in the poker game with the millionaires Flower and Stone, Nashe and Pozzi are “relegated to the category of nonpersons”. (Music, 103) With their financial means they obviously seem to have lost their value as humans, too. In contrast to *The New York Trilogy*, however, in which Quinn signifies a “blank space [...] an empty signifier” (Slocombe, 136), Nashe slowly gains a feeling for himself. In other words, by going to his limits and by enduring the consequences

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<sup>92</sup> See Shiloh, 162.



of his deeds, he finally finds his true identity: “He had never thought of himself as a man destined for great things. All his life, he had assumed that he was just like everyone else. Now, little by little, he was beginning to suspect that he had been wrong.” (Music, 185)

In *Oracle Night*, nihilistic elements occur on various levels due to the fact that the narrative has a very complex structure. In contrast to *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance*, the decline of the protagonist’s physical and mental constitution is not described at the beginning of the story since Orr has already reached the zero at this point. Instead the whole process is summed up in the first sentence: “I had been sick for a long time.” Like Fogg, he describes himself as pessimistic at this stage and states: “[now that] I had mysteriously failed to die, what choice did I have but to live as though a future life were waiting for me?” (Oracle Night, 1) Although his situation is not self-induced, which becomes clear at a later point in the story, his attitude is comparable to that of Hamsun’s protagonist in *Hunger*: “There is nothing to keep him going – and yet he keeps on going.” (Art of Hunger, 20) The reason for his hospitalisation is revealed to the reader only towards the ending when Orr uses the last pages of his blue notebook to recapitulate the events prior to his breakdown. When he comes to the “fatal” day he writes:

The catastrophe strikes. On January 12, 1982, I collapse in the 14th Street subway station and fall down a flight of stairs. [...] I’m taken to Saint Vincent’s Hospital and kept there for four months [...] One morning, Dr. Justin Berg takes Grace aside and tells her they’ve given up hope. [...] [She] has no choice but to resign herself to the prospect of my imminent death. (Oracle Night, 192)

He adds that at the moment he left the hospital he was “a dead man” (Oracle Night, 193). However, the reason for this loss of identity, Orr’s fall, is not the conscious act it is in *The Music of Chance* where Nashe “closed his eyes and jumped” (Music, 1). The result is nonetheless the same since Orr, like Fogg and Nashe, is forced to begin anew at zero. In other words: *Tabula Rasa*. This is the name of Orr’s first novel “about a musician who recovers from a long illness and slowly puts his life together again” (Oracle Night, 105). But apparently, the tragedy affects his wife as well who is herself “falling to pieces” (Oracle Night, 193). Their fate, it appears, is inextricably connected. One can draw this conclusion considering Grace’s dream in which she and her husband find themselves locked in an underground room which happens to be the same room the protagonist of Orr’s novel is trapped in. One may understand this as a metaphor for the crisis that affects their life. When Grace tells him about her dream she says:

I wanted to go down to the basement. [...] in the middle of the last room there was a trapdoor. I yanked it open and saw that there was a ladder leading to a lower level. I started climbing down and this time you followed right after me. You were just as curious as I was by then, and it was like we were having an adventure. (Oracle Night, 119)

Like Nick Bowen they are not able to exit the room and her dream ends with their imprisonment. When Orr asks her if they could escape at the end she answers:

I didn't get that far. But we would have found a way out. People can't die in their dreams, you know. Even if the door was locked, something would have happened to get us out. That's how it works. As long as you are dreaming there is always a way out. (Oracle Night, 121)

The episode echoes Fogg's rescue from the Central Park because it stresses the importance of human relationships. Thus it points out again the existentialist maxim of the individual's "personal engagement with the Other." (Shiloh, 12) Apart from this anti-solipsistic philosophy it should be noted that *Oracle Night* conveys a rather pessimistic, deeply nihilistic picture of the world which is portrayed as a meaningless and chaotic place. A striking example is Orr's report on a newspaper article about a drug addicted mother who firstly killed her infant baby and then a "customer":

It was hard enough to absorb the information about the baby, but when I came to the stabbing incident in the fourth paragraph, I understood that I was reading a story about the end of mankind, that that room in the Bronx was the precise spot on earth where human life had lost its meaning. (Oracle Night, 101)

He accepts the absence of morality and ethics as a fact. This, however, does not make *Oracle Night* an example of so called "blank fiction" (Slocombe, 142) which generally rejects to make any value judgements. On the contrary, Orr is far from feeling indifferent about this fact and almost "collapsed in a fit of real sobbing." (Oracle Night, 103) This means that, like Fogg and Nashe, he acknowledges the chaos of the world and, as a result of this acceptance, is able to regain his identity and even a feeling of "happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the world." (Oracle Night, 217)

### 3.1.7. Open endings

The open ending, in contrast to the traditional Victorian closed ending, is an attribute of both modernist and postmodernist fiction. It frequently results in labyrinthine structures without a centre and especially without any definable destination. Apparently, it is not the outcome of a story that is important but the story itself: “actually the way *is* the end. [...] Plot is practically deprived of beginning and end, or at least of the end; it is the *middle* that counts.” (Hoffmann, 309) This affects the reader’s sense of suspense which is usually built up by constructing some form of crisis the reader expects to be solved at the end. The classical example hereof is detective fiction which aims at the solution of the ‘case’. Auster who has been repeatedly referred to as writer of detective stories after the publication of *The New York Trilogy* states: “Mystery novels always give answers; my work is about asking questions.” (Art of Hunger, 295) Indeed, he identifies the open-ended structure as a distinctive feature of the fairy tale.<sup>93</sup> Similar to the minimalist narrative style of that genre, the anti-closure can be understood as an instrument to inspire the reader’s imagination.

*Moon Palace* is written retrospectively by the main character himself which gives the novel a certain amount of stableness for it implies that the narrator survives and is still able to ‘tell’ something about his past. By the end of *Moon Palace*, Fogg walks through the desert of Utah after his car has been stolen. When he reaches the shore we hear:

This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins. [...] Behind me, the town went about its business, making familiar late-century American noises [...] Then the moon came up from behind the hills. It was a full moon, as round and yellow as a burning stone. I kept my eyes on it as it rose into the night sky, not turning away until it half found its place in the darkness.  
(Moon Palace, 298)

This passage obviously echoes the words at the beginning of the book: “It was the summer that men first walked on the moon. I was very young back then, but I did not believe there would ever be a future.” (Moon Palace, 1) Auster again refers to the moon, probably the most powerful symbol of the novel. At first appearance, the ending simply circles back to the beginning as Fogg’s living conditions and his financial situation are nearly the same again. This is, however, not a case of a “circular” ending, a “text with its tail in its mouth” (McHale, 111), which can be found in a number of modernist and postmodern novels. Quite the opposite is true because Fogg’s attitude toward the future has changed considerably, not least

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<sup>93</sup> See Art of Hunger, 297.

because the question of his origins has finally been answered. Therefore, the end constitutes the beginning of a new stage in the protagonist's life, but at the same time also the conclusion of the novel. In this sense it could be even labelled as "concord fiction." This term refers to "fictions, whose ends are consonant with origins, and in concord, however unexpected, with their precedents" (Kermode, 5). Kermode argues that human beings need fictive concords with a beginning and an end in order to make sense of their life, especially in cultural traditions in which time is understood as rectilinear rather than cyclic. Thus it is the "concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions" (Kermode, 35) which can be extended to literary fiction as well. To a certain extent, *Moon Palace* may indeed correspond to this concept.

Moreover, the last scene inspired the beginning of the consecutive book *The Music of Chance*. Auster says - referring to the final section, in which Fogg drives through the desert - that he "wanted to get back inside that car, to give myself a chance to go on driving around America. So there was that very immediate and visceral impulse, which is how *The Music of Chance* begins". (Art of Hunger, 311) In contrast to the optimistic ending of *Moon Palace*, the final part of this novel is much darker and also highly ambiguous: After Nashe's debt finally has been paid off, he drives with the foreman Murks and his son Floyd to a bar in a nearby town. He wins a pool-game and instead of taking any money wishes to drive back in his former car himself:

At the precise moment the car hit eighty-five, Murks leaned forward and snapped off the radio. The sudden silence came as a jolt to Nashe, and he automatically turned to the old man and told him to mind his own business. When he looked at the road again a moment later, he could already see the headlights looming up at him. [...] There was no time to stop, no time to prevent what was going to happen, and so instead of slamming his foot on the brakes he pressed down even harder on the gas [...] And then the light was upon him, and Nashe shut his eyes, unable to look at it anymore. (Music, 198)

This ending can be called open in nearly every respect: First of all, the death of the protagonist Nashe and the two other car passengers is only hinted at and cannot be proven with certainty. This possibility, however, is reinforced by Nashe's statement the day before the accident which retrospectively appears like a bad omen: When Murk's suggests that Nashe could write his letters "tomorrow" he replies: "That's true. But then, again, I could be dead tomorrow. You never know what's going to happen." (Music, 188)

Indeed, whether he survives the accident or not doesn't seem to be the essential point as Nashe's personal development is of much more importance. At last he has gained some knowledge about his own abilities and learned to accept the course of his life which means that the personal quest for which he has set out in the beginning was successful. Auster states that

[by] the end of the book, he has transcended everything he had been [...] So whether the car crashes or whether he manages to elude the on-coming headlight, whether he dies or whether he lives is much less important than the inner victory he's won at that moment. (Auster in Martin, 63)

Hence, the ambivalent ending may not be a means to let the reader guess the right 'solution', but to show that it is of no importance for the story. It is an interesting detail that the film version comes up with an alternative ending: In the final scene of the movie, Nashe hitchhikes by the side of the road and is collected by a stranger, ironically played by Paul Auster.<sup>94</sup> Apart from this, also the mysterious events before remain unresolved: Neither the question of Jack Pozzi's destiny nor the whereabouts and identities of the millionaires are explained. This probably demonstrates Auster's philosophy not to "give answers" but to "ask questions" very well. Consequently, it can be said that *The Music of Chance* indeed corresponds to the model of an open-ended novel.

The last part of *Oracle Night*, one can argue, is poised between a full-fledged closure and an open ending. It is in turn reminiscent of Fogg's final words and again indicates a kind of new beginning. After his return from the funeral of John Trause, Fogg finds an envelope in his mailbox which contains a letter from the late friend Trause and a cheque:

I saw John's ashes streaming out of the urn in the park that morning. I saw Grace lying in her bed in the hospital. I saw myself tearing up the pages of the blue notebook, and after a while [...] I had my face in my hands was sobbing my guts out. [...] It was a happiness beyond consolation, beyond misery, beyond all the ugliness and beauty of the world. Eventually, the tears subsided, and I went into the bedroom to put on a fresh set of clothes. Ten minutes later, I was out on the street again, walking toward the hospital to see Grace. (Oracle Night, 216-217)

In this passage, Auster skilfully sums up the most important topics of the novel by mentioning Trause, Orr's wife Grace, the blue notebook and also by pointing out that the main character is at last "out on the street again". Again, the narrative seems to lead back to the opening

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<sup>94</sup> See Shiloh, 192.

paragraph in which Orr describes his discharge from hospital and his inability to walk. Although it may appear quite optimistic, the ending is far away from being what could be called 'happy-ending' or a traditional closure which always reduces the "work's meaning to a single and complete sense that excludes the claims of other interpretations." (Baldick, 43) Instead of that, Auster does neither clarify the issue of the mysterious blue notebook nor the theory of the affair between Trause and Grace. As in most of his novels, there are more open questions than answers. This leads to the conclusion that the ending of *Oracle Night* can be described as open, as many loose ends are not tied up, but it is certainly not a case of experimental, postmodern anti-closure.

### **3.2. Postmodern representation of characteristic motifs**

Readers of Paul Auster's novels may observe that certain themes and motifs occur repeatedly in his works. By reference to selected examples it will be investigated to what extent the representation of these motifs adheres to the tenets of postmodernist literature.

#### **3.2.1. Inheritance and money**

These two motifs are frequently connected in Auster's novels and especially money seems to be an important factor. Nevertheless, in a radio interview he claims that he "never, never thought about that." But he admits also that "when you don't have money, money becomes the overriding obsession of your life" (Auster, *The Bat Segundo Show*) which is one of the central topics of his autobiographical novel *Hand to Mouth*.

The unexpected inheritance is the starting point in a number of Auster's stories, most strikingly perhaps in *The Music of Chance*, but also in *Moon Palace*. In contrast to Jim Nashe and Auster himself, the young protagonist of *Moon Palace* doesn't inherit a large sum of money but his uncle's great book collection. Therefore, the inheritance is not something purely material and impersonal but, on the contrary, it "symbolises an aspect of his uncle's psyche." (Martin, 81) The books may represent the strong bond between Fogg and Victor. The latter bequeaths them to him as a present before he leaves the city and explains: "I have no money to give you [...] and not one word of advice. Take the books to make me happy." (*Moon Palace*, 1-2) At first, Fogg uses the boxes of books as furniture in his apartment and continually reads through all the volumes although he soon gets too weak to grasp their

meaning. The reading is a symbolical act since “each time I opened a box, I was able to enter another segment of my uncle’s life.” (Moon Palace, 21) Due to his financial situation, however, he is forced to pawn the books. This is a paradoxical situation for, in order to survive, he has to give away not only personal memorabilia but also pieces of his own furniture. Finally, Fogg even considers selling Victor’s clarinet but abandons this idea for the simple reason that the piece would presumably not bring in enough money. Ruefully he comments:

As time went on, I realised how close I had come to committing an unpardonable sin. The clarinet was my last link to uncle Victor, and because it was the last, because there were no other traces of him, it carried the entire force of his soul within it. (Moon Palace, 41)

Fogg is not only the heir of Victor’s library but later also of a part of his grandfather’s fortune. It is remarkable that the second inheritance seems to have the opposite effect on him because in contrast to his uncle’s legacy, which he understood as a responsibility and connection to Victor, Effing’s money signifies independence. He notes:

Effing’s death had released me from my bondage to him, but at the same time, Effing had released me from my bondage to the world, and because I was young, because I still knew so little about the world, I was unable to understand that this period of happiness could ever end. (Moon Palace, 222)

The statement may already foreshadow the loss of this money and later of the sum he inherits from his father towards the end of the book. This points towards the ambiguous role of money in general and especially the paradoxical nature of an inheritance as it constitutes a bond between the heir and his dead relative but at the same time, the death of this person allows a life without dependency.

Apart from that, in Auster’s novels money signifies both justice and its radical opposite. In *Moon Palace* this can be observed most clearly by the example of Effing’s fortune. He earned it by investing money that he once took from a group of bandits after killing them in self-defence. Later he admits that he

simply wanted the money for himself. This urge was so strong that he never bothered to examine what he did. He took the money because it was there, because in some sense he felt that it already belonged to him, and that was that. The question of right or wrong never entered into it. (Moon Palace, 177)

Although the two situations are inherently different, there is a certain similarity between Effing's unexpected fortune and Fogg's sudden windfall because the stolen booty of the Gresham brothers places Effing at the doorstep of a new existence.<sup>95</sup> Again, it is the death of someone that enables him to begin a new life. Nonetheless, in contrast to that, obviously the bandits did not deliberately bequeath the money to him. So Effing decides to give back exactly this sum to make up for his deed. In order to do this, he and Fogg perform a "series of guerilla attacks" (Moon Palace, 199) in which they hand out dollar bills to strangers on the streets of New York. Effing even compares themselves to "a pair of Robin Hoods on the prowl, ready to bestow our munificence on the lucky souls who cross our path." (Moon Palace, 200) Hence, money always seems to have a symbolic meaning in the novels of Paul Auster. But it is an immensely ambiguous symbol that represents independence and self-determination as well as death and injustice.

This becomes even more apparent in *The Music of Chance*. As already said, at the beginning of the novel Nashe inherits a "colossal sum" (Music, 2) from his father, a man he had not seen for more than thirty years. In this regard, it is possible to draw a parallel between him and Solomon Barber to whom his father Effing also left a generous legacy. Barber states: "I've inherited forty-six thousand dollars from someone I never even met. That's more money I've ever had in my life. It's a tremendous windfall, a boon beyond imagining." (Moon Palace, 267-268) Nashe's situation appears comparably paradoxical:

The man had been his father, after all, and that alone should have counted for a few somber thoughts about the mysteries of life. But it turned out that Nashe felt little else but joy. The money was so extraordinary to him, so monumental in its consequences, that it overwhelmed all the rest. (Music, 3)

Seemingly, the motif of the - always unexpected – inheritance is an image of chance. This accidental event, however, is then turned into something inevitable in the course of the story<sup>96</sup> since the whole narrative depends on it. Hence, money and inheritance are inextricably connected to the concepts of contingency and fate which probably makes clear that both are also important in terms of structure. Besides that, Auster points out the autobiographical aspect when he says about *The Music of Chance*:

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<sup>95</sup> See Weisenburger, 135.

<sup>96</sup> See Bruckner, 29.



I wanted to explore the implications of the windfall I had received after my father's death [...] This led me to start thinking about the question of freedom, which is ultimately the true subject of the book. (Art of Hunger, 311)

Money seems to activate the entire plot of *The Music of Chance*<sup>97</sup> because it enables Nashe to quit his work and begin his journey. At the same time, it is his only motivation for the fatal poker game, later the sole reason to build the wall in order to work off the debt and therefore responsible for the tragic turn of the story. Another striking aspect is that in *The Music of Chance* it is never earned. It is always either won, acquired by accident or the result of cheating<sup>98</sup>: Nashe decides to stop working after the unexpected windfall of the inheritance, Pozzi earns his living by gambling and defrauding other players, Flower and Stone won their fortune in the lottery. Even the finances of both Pozzi's and Nashe's fathers were the result of speculation on the stock market and shady financial enterprises. This stresses that in Auster's novels money is not something stable and reliable. Mostly its acquisition is the consequence of luck and its loss results from misfortune. What has been already hinted at in *Moon Palace* becomes very clear in *The Music of Chance* namely that money can make people free, but mostly it corrupts and enslaves.<sup>99</sup> Nashe has to realise this at an early stage of the story. When after about six months of travelling half of his financial means are spent we hear:

Slowly but surely, the journey was turning into a paradox. The money was responsible for his freedom, but each time he used it to buy another portion of that freedom, he was denying himself an equal portion of it as well. The money kept him going, but it was also an engine of loss, inexorably leading him back to the place where he had begun. (Music, 16)

Money, also in the form of an inheritance, is not represented as either positive or negative. Instead Auster underlines its ambiguity which is clearly a feature of postmodern literature. Moreover, he points towards the danger of confusing wealth with happiness as Nashe does. One of the reasons to accept the unjust punishment after the lost poker game is that in his eyes Stone's and Flower's protection of their fortune is justified. In this regard, he even adopts the millionaires' ideologies who equate money with power and good fortune.<sup>100</sup> This may be interpreted as a critique of the capitalistic system, something many of Auster's novels feature.

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<sup>97</sup> See Shiloh, 164.

<sup>98</sup> See Shiloh, 189.

<sup>99</sup> See Shiloh, 171.

<sup>100</sup> See Shiloh, 186.

### 3.2.2. Symbols

The works of Paul Auster are frequently marked by a mysterious mood. One reason for this impression is perhaps that in nearly all of them, one or more immensely powerful symbols are established which connect the single parts of the novel as a kind of red thread. These symbols seem to give his texts an almost metaphysical quality.

It appears needless to note that the central image in *Moon Palace* is the moon. According to Auster it is

many things all at once, a touchstone. It's the moon as myth, as "radiant Diana, image of all that is dark within us"; the imagination, love madness. At the same time, it's the moon as object, as celestial body, as lifeless stone hovering in the sky. But it's also the longing for what is not, the unattainable, the human desire for transcendence. And yet it's history as well, particularly American history. (Art of Hunger, 309)

This all-embracing symbol seemingly follows the protagonist through his life and is always present in the story. First of all, Fogg's uncle Victor plays in a music band with the name Moon Men, formerly in another group called Moonlight Moods<sup>101</sup>. Also the painting by Blakelock, which constitutes the core of Effing's tale, bears the title *Moonlight*. This piece of art, however, does not only form the centre of his narrative but also of the whole book. In the description of the painting we hear that "a perfectly round full moon sat in the middle of the canvas – the precise mathematical center, it seemed to me – and this pale white disc illuminated everything above it and below it." (Moon Palace, 133) Hence, the moon is the "precise mathematical center" of the novel. The formulation that it "illuminated everything" implies that it constitutes a symbol suggesting some supernatural order and hidden pattern.<sup>102</sup> This is easily comprehensible considering the following points: it is, of all people, a man called Neil Armstrong who informs Fogg about the death of his uncle. Later, he witnesses the historical event of the moon landing and comments on this contingency with the words:

Perhaps the word moon had changed for me after I saw men wandering around its surface. Perhaps I was struck by the coincidence of having met a man named Neil Armstrong in Boise, Idaho, and then watching a man by the same name fly off

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<sup>101</sup> See Moon Palace, 11.

<sup>102</sup> See Bilton, 65.

into outer space [...] but the fact was that the words Moon Palace began to haunt my mind with all the mystery and fascination of an oracle. (Moon Palace, 31)

By that he refers to the only thing he can see from the window of his apartment which is a neon sign of a Chinese restaurant. He describes these two words as “magic letters, and they hung there in the darkness like a message from the sky itself.” (Moon Palace, 16)

Another significant point is certainly the name of Fogg’s father Barber. His first name is Solomon which is shortened later to Sol. As Fogg explains, his father learned from the Elizabethan poets that this was the old word for sun and also the French word for ground. This is remarkable in consideration of the fact that Fogg is frequently associated with the moon and repeatedly referred to as a “lunatic”. (Moon Palace, 19) It underlines his relationship with Barber since, as Effing states at another point in the story, his companion Byrne taught him that a “man can’t know where he is on the earth except in relation to the moon or a star.” (Moon Palace, 149) This is reminiscent of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage. Lacan assumes that a baby originally has no sense of self and only at a later stage learns to define itself by looking at a mirror, mostly the mother’s face.<sup>103</sup> It understands that “if someone is looking at me then I must exist. But this existence is, in turn, determined by another.” (Bilton, 65)

Nevertheless, it is necessary to note that the moon remains an arbitrary symbol throughout the whole book. The reason is that although, as the examples above have shown, the moon is established as the central image of the narrative, it is never revealed what it actually signifies. One can describe this as a kind of double coding because

[e]inem traditionellen Modell romantischer Imagination, wie es in der Moderne nicht selten zitiert wird [...] wird in *Moon Palace* die zufällige imaginative Sinnstiftung durch die Arbitrarität des Zeichens konterkariert. (Renner, 148)

This indicates that Auster’s texts, and *Moon Palace* in particular, feature characteristic elements of both modernist and postmodernist fiction.

Finally, the following detail should be added as it appears interesting in this context: *The New York Trilogy* was rejected by as many as seventeen publishers before it was accepted by a small firm in Los Angeles, namely the Sun & Moon Press. This appears to be one of the coincidences as it could be found in a text by Paul Auster.

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<sup>103</sup> See Lacan, 44.

Also *The Music of Chance*, as already pointed out, is concerned with the powers of fate and coincidence. Since the turning point of the story is a lost poker game, nearly all the central events in this novel depend on the right or wrong choice of numbers. Hence, they signify either triumph or defeat so that they are frequently personified. In the Plaza Hotel, for example, Pozzi and Nashe are given rooms on the seventh floor which Pozzi interprets as a sign and immediately remarks: "Lucky seven". (Music, 35) Later, the millionaires Flower and Stone speak about the different character traits of numbers when they recount the story of their winning in the lottery which took place *seven* years ago. Flower explains that for some reason they discussed their choice of numbers because as an accountant

I've dealt with numbers all my life, of course, and after a while you begin to feel that each number has a personality of its own. A twelve is very different from a thirteen, for example. Twelve is upright, conscientious, intelligent, whereas thirteen is a loner, a shady character who won't think twice about breaking the law to get what he wants. [...] Numbers have souls, and you can't help but get involved with them in a personal way. (Music, 66)

It is interesting that he refers to thirteen as "shady character" because this number occurs several times in the story, mostly in connection with crucial events: thirteen playing cards are in each suit, Nashe is born on the thirteenth of the month and he encounters Pozzi after he has been on the road for thirteen months. Hence, the 'unlucky' thirteen is often "synonymous with aleatory play". (Martin, 44) Moreover, it can be compared to Flower and Stone because they also didn't rely on the power of contingency in order to win the lottery.<sup>104</sup> By consciously choosing prime numbers they seem to have eliminated the intrusion of chance elements and by keeping Pozzi and Nashe like slaves obviously don't "think twice about breaking the law to get what [they] want."

The most obvious and probably central symbol in the novel, however, is the wall the two debtors are forced to build. Like most of the images in Auster's texts, the wall bears a number of different meanings. Thus it is a "signifier, with multiple and contradictory signifieds." (Shiloh, 194) The following statement will strengthen this point. It is taken from Auster's play "Laurel and Hardy go to Heaven" in which he used the motif of the wall building for the first time. Hardy reflects:

When I think of the wall, it's as if I were going beyond what I can think ... A wall can be many things, can't it? It can keep in or keep out. It can protect or destroy.

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<sup>104</sup> See Martin, 62.

It can help things ... or make them worse. It can be part of something greater ... or only what it is. Do you see what I mean? It all depends on how you look at it. (Hand to Mouth, 144)

In this sense, it is an excellent example of Auster's postmodernism since it represents such a number of different things that it actually signifies nothing at all and only refers to itself. In *The Music of Chance* the monument is rebuilt from the ruins of a historical castle and supposed to become something new, but instead it fulfils no function<sup>105</sup>, not even an aesthetic one. Thus it is postmodern because it does not preserve its original purpose but rather subverts it. Flower's words, explaining their "next project" to Nashe and Pozzi, may underline this:

Rather than try to reconstruct the castle, we're going to turn it into a work of art. To my mind, there's nothing more mysterious or beautiful than a wall. I can already see it: standing out there in the meadow, rising up like some enormous barrier against time. It will be a memorial to itself, gentlemen, a symphony of resurrected stones, and every day it will sing a dirge for the past we carry within us. (Music, 78)

Apart from being a pseudo-historical object, the wall can be understood also as the "sum of other walls" (Varvogli, 109). Besides Auster's play, it may be a representation of the wall that occurs in many of his poems and also seems to be an allusion to Kafka's *Great Wall of China*. In this fictional report on the construction of this historical monument, the narrator reflects on the question why the leadership had decided on piecemeal construction instead of a continuous work. He finally states: "So the conclusion remains that the leadership wanted something impractical. An odd conclusion! True enough, and yet from another perspective it had some inherent justification". (Kafka) Comparable to that, Nashe and Pozzi are supposed to transport the stones with a children's wagon which is also far from being a practical solution, but Flower speaks of a "fair punishment" (Music, 96), thus he believes also in an "inherent justification". Furthermore, the wall may evoke Camus' absurd wall which suggests that the human attempt to find meaning in a meaningless world is pointless<sup>106</sup> which echoes the absurdity of the whole project. The final aspect of this highly complex symbol is that it may be a metaphor for the barricades between Nashe and his environment. Pozzi refers to that when he discloses his gambling philosophy to him. He stresses that "the important thing was to remain inscrutable, to build a wall around yourself and not let anyone in." (Music, 57) The only way to gain success, this seems to imply, is to isolate yourself from the

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<sup>105</sup> See Varvogli, 109.

<sup>106</sup> See Shiloh, 195.

world which is reminiscent of Auster's depiction of the writer as a solitary character. Hence, like the wall both Pozzi and Nashe build around themselves, writing "isolates, separates, traps". (Bilton, 63)

In *Oracle Night*, Auster takes up again the symbol of the notebook which could be described even as a self-reference or, in other words, as a kind of 'insider joke' between him and his readers. With very few exceptions, the protagonists of his narratives feel the urge, or the necessity, to write into a notebook. *Oracle Night* thus could be understood as homage to this stationery item because seemingly, magical powers are attributed to it. This may strongly remind one of the legendary moleskine notebooks. Allegedly they have been used by well known artists such as Ernest Hemingway, Oscar Wilde, Henri Matisse and especially the writer Bruce Chatwin. As the legend goes, he used to buy his notebooks at a stationary store in Paris and stocked up on them before he went on his journeys. When finally the last producer of the moleskine notebooks had to close down, the stationer is supposed to have said to Chatwin: "Le vrai moleskine n'est plus."<sup>107</sup> "The true moleskin is no more". The similarity to *Oracle Night* is striking: At the beginning of the novel, Orr purchases his blue notebook, which has been produced in Portugal, in Chang's stationery store. When Orr places all of his items on the counter to pay, the salesman takes up the book and

ran his fingertips lightly over the cover. It was a gesture of appreciation, almost a caress. "Lovely book", he said, in heavily accented English. "But no more. No more Portugal. Very sad story." (*Oracle Night*, 5)

Orr describes the diary in detail and later even speaks of the "metaphysics of paper". (*Oracle Night*, 6) This shows that Auster points out right at the beginning which essential role this piece of equipment plays in the story. At a later point, Orr comes back to the store in order to buy another notebook. Chang refuses to sell the last one he has in stock to him for reasons which are not important in this context. Orr recounts: "I should have said goodbye to Chang and left the store immediately, but I didn't. The Portuguese notebooks had become too powerful a fixation by then". (*Oracle Night*, 184) The consequence is a fight between him and the owner of the store, but nevertheless, Orr has to leave without the piece. When he later fails to complete his Flitraft tale he recapitulates:

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<sup>107</sup> See [www.moleskine.co.uk/history](http://www.moleskine.co.uk/history).

If I had learned anything from my ferocious encounter with Chang on Saturday, it was that the notebook was a place of trouble for me, and whatever I tried to write in it would end in failure. Every story would stop in the middle.  
(Oracle Night, 188)

It is remarkable that he refers to the notebook as a certain place and not as an object. This may indicate that it symbolises a separate universe, governed by the power of writing. Additionally, the fact that it has been produced in Portugal is relevant because this country bears a special meaning in the course of the story: firstly, it is a Portuguese publisher who unexpectedly makes an offer on Orr's last two novels. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it can be assumed that his wife Grace had an affair with Trause during a short period when they both lived in Portugal.

Another feature of the notebook is also worth mentioning in this context, namely its colour. Generally it can be observed that colours frequently have a symbolic meaning in Auster's novels. The three main characters of *Ghosts*, for instance, are called White, Black and Blue. These names are apparently mere pseudonyms, probably due to the fact that these figures may be doppelgänger of each other rather than real persons.<sup>108</sup> Colours, it seems, are the embodiment of certain ideas and thus comply with the definition of a symbol. In the strictest sense of the word, this simply "signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself". (Abrams, 312) This can be clearly observed in the case of *Oracle Night*. Orr realises that he shares his fascination for the blue notebook with Trause. Later he refers to this fact in a conversation with his wife and says: "It turns out that we are both in love with the colour blue. In particular, a defunct line of blue notebooks that used to be made in Portugal." Grace replies: "Well, blue is a good color. Very calm, very serene. It sits well in the mind. I like it so much, I have to make a conscious effort not to use it on all the covers I design at work." (Oracle Night, 44) That is certainly significant as it may lead to the assumption that blue symbolises Grace. Bearing this in mind, the fact that Orr and Trause share their fondness for this colour could mean that both also share their affection for Grace. In the further course of their conversation, the couple discusses the question whether colours "really convey emotions" and "moral qualities." Orr asks what blue does stand for whereon Grace answers: "I don't know. Hope maybe." "And sadness. As in, I'm feeling blue. Or, I've got the blues." "Don't forget true blue." "Yes, you're right. Blue for loyalty." Blue appears to be an ambiguous colour since it stands for a number of contradictory qualities and so it constitutes a meaningless symbol, or rather, a symbol with too many different meanings. In

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<sup>108</sup> See Martin, 124.

*Oracle Night*, however, this colour has a personal meaning for Orr: According to him, he spent his summers at a sleep-away camp when he was a child. It always ended with the so called ‘color war.’ This was a competition between the children who, for this purpose, were divided into two teams. The groups were represented by the colours white and red. After some years though

a third team was formed, a kind of secret society, a brotherhood of kindred souls. I haven’t thought about it in years, but it was very important to me at the time. The Blue Team. (*Oracle Night*, 45)

He explains that the team had been invented by one of the counsellors named Bruce, in whose opinion not everybody could be accepted as a member of this group which

came to stand for something more than just a bunch of rinky-dink relay races. They represented a human ideal, a tight-knit association of tolerant and sympathetic individuals, the dream of a perfect society [...] but Bruce didn’t take it seriously. That was the beauty of the Blue Team. The whole thing was a kind of joke. (*Oracle Night*, 46)

Hence, this group seemingly represents Orr’s image of an ideal person because a member of the team had to have certain (humanist) qualities such as independence, humour, intellect, and had to be “capable of making fine moral distinctions [and] a reader of books” (*Oracle Night*, 47). This definition may demonstrate his “humanist faith in the power of language” (Hutcheon, 183), something that is mostly questioned by postmodernist art and literature. The team may also stand for the story as whole: on the one side, the novel offers social and political criticism but on the other side, Auster subverts and parodies this idealistic attitude. As repeatedly noted, this is an intrinsically postmodern feature because parody “forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin and originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions.” (Hutcheon, 11) The idea of the perfect society, in other words, the “Blue Team”, is further contested by Grace’s comment:

What you’re describing is a good person. Pure and simple [...] But people don’t always act the same way. They’re good one minute and bad the next. They make mistakes. Good people make bad things, Sid. (*Oracle Night*, 48)

She thus points towards the ambivalent human nature in general. In regard to the colour blue this probably implies that, as powerful a symbol it may be, it cannot be associated with only



one meaning since this would be a mere simplification. Apparently, this applies to all of the symbols of Auster's novels.

### **3.2.3. Representation of time and space**

Apart from the significance of various objects, colours or numbers, apparently the representation of time and space has a symbolic function in the novels of Paul Auster, too. The environment thus frequently mirrors the inner life of his protagonists, whereas open landscapes and the city are contrasted with enclosed rooms and solitude. Besides the relevance of space, the chronological order of events and the power of time become increasingly important in his writing. This will be demonstrated in the following chapter.

#### **3.2.3.1. Open space and the city**

Most of Auster's novels are concerned with uncommon occurrences and their consequences for the protagonists who, as a result, frequently have to live in extreme conditions. According to this, it seems to be appropriate that nearly all of the stories are located either in the metropolis New York or in complete isolation. The author focuses on the contrast between these two locations which also represents the inner conflict of the characters in his books. Already the name of his first publication of fiction, *The New York Trilogy*, implies that this city plays a major role in Auster's writing. Comparable maybe to Joyce's Dublin or Dickens's London, New York can even be understood as an acting character. Moreover, Paul Auster lives in Brooklyn so that he does not portray the metropolis from the outside but as he experiences it as an inhabitant. In most of his stories, and especially in the three parts of the *Trilogy*, New York is depicted as a restrictive and impersonal environment in which the characters have to struggle to survive.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, his depiction of the city has been changing over the years. Whereas in his earlier writing New York is portrayed as a hostile and dangerous place in which "intimacy and connection are perceived as threatening, and the outside world appears both nightmarish and oppressive" (Martin, 146), his recent texts rather focus on a sense of unity between the inhabitants as a result of the attacks of September 11. This can be seen by the example of *The Brooklyn Follies*. At the ending of the book, the narrator Nathan Glass says:

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<sup>109</sup> See Martin, 145.

It was eight o'clock when I stepped out onto the street, eight o'clock in the morning of September 11, 2001 – just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Just two hours after that, the smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies would drift over toward Brooklyn and come pouring down on us in a white cloud of ashes and death.  
(Brooklyn Follies, 306)

The author's hometown is also the central location of *Moon Palace*. After Fogg's dismissal from his apartment, he decides to spend the night in the Central Park. In his eyes, the park differs from the rest of the city altogether and even

became a sanctuary for me, a refuge of inwardness against the grinding demands of the street [...] [where] everything is bodies and commotion, and like it or not, you cannot enter them without adhering to a rigid protocol of behaviour. To walk among the crowd means never going faster than anyone else, never lagging behind your neighbour, never doing anything to disrupt the flow of human traffic. If you play by the rules of this game, people will tend to ignore you.  
(Moon Palace, 55)

Hence, by not attracting attention it is possible to literally disappear in the crowd which is exactly what many of Auster's protagonists do. This is an indicator of the isolation and lack of communal identity which is frequently associated with the modern urban life in the era of postmodernism.<sup>110</sup> In contrast to this, Central Park is comparable to an oasis in the middle of this rigid system. Fogg says that the park "allowed for a much broader range of variables. People smiled at each other and held hands, bent their bodies into unusual shapes, kissed. It was live and let live". (Moon Palace, 56) It can be described as a city within the city which is reminiscent of the already discussed Chinese-Box structure of Auster's novels.

Furthermore, the author draws a parallel between words and the labyrinthine structure of New York's street. Auster understands the "poet as a solitary wanderer, as man in the crowd, as faceless scribe." (Art of Hunger, 42) Apart from writing Effing's obituary, Fogg has the task to describe his impressions to Effing while driving him through the city in his wheelchair. The confusing system of streets can be compared to the vast number of words in a book. This comparison, however, is not new in Auster's work. In *City of Glass*, Stillman forms the words 'The Tower of Babel' by wandering ostensibly aimless through Manhattan. Hence, "to lose oneself in the labyrinth of the city" can be equated with losing "oneself in the labyrinth of words on a page" (Bilton, 63). At first, Fogg feels overwhelmed by the myriad of different impressions surrounding him, yet slowly his view of the world begins to change and

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<sup>110</sup> See Hassan, 40.

he considers his task as a “spiritual exercise” (Moon Palace, 118). In the course of time Fogg realises that

[e]verything was constantly in flux, and though two bricks in a wall might strongly resemble each other, they could never be construed as identical. More to the point, the same brick was never really the same. [...] All inanimate things were disintegrating, all living things were dying. My head would start to throb whenever I thought of this, imagining the furious and hectic motions of molecules, the unceasing explosions of matter, the collisions, the chaos boiling under the surface of all things. (Moon Palace, 119)

By all appearances, he perceives the world as a discontinuous and inconsistent place. This is characteristic for the depiction of space in postmodernist fiction in which it is “less constructed than deconstructed by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time.” (McHale, 45)

A specific part of this city plays a major role in *Moon Palace*. It has been mentioned before that China is frequently associated with mysterious and significant events in Auster’s texts. Accordingly, it is Chinatown - in this case in San Francisco - where Effing’s spine gets broken. At that time, Fogg’s grandfather later reports, he shut himself off from the world and only ventured out into Chinatown at night.

It was always Chinatown. He never wanted to go there, but he could never find the courage not to go. Against his will, he began haunting the brothels and opium dens and gambling parlors that were hidden in the labyrinth of its narrow streets. (Moon Palace, 182)

A very similar description can be found in *Oracle Night*, whereas in this case it is New York’s Chinatown whereto Chang leads the narrator Orr. When he leaves Chang’s car he “followed him down the densely thronged avenue, breathing in the pungent fumes and acrid smells of the fish stores and vegetable stands that lined the block.” (Oracle Night, 131) This city district thus is mostly depicted as a closed universe within the city, or to put it differently, an “alien space within a familiar space”. (McHale, 46) This so called ‘interpolation’ is one possible strategy established by many postmodernist writers in order to deconstruct the space of the fictional world.<sup>111</sup> Also Fogg is overwhelmed by a sense of alienation when he comes to his new neighbourhood after moving into an apartment in Chinatown. He says that he never had the feeling of being in another part of the city. Instead

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<sup>111</sup> See McHale, 45.

“I had travelled halfway around the world to get where I was, and it stood to reason that nothing should be familiar to me anymore, not even myself.” (Moon Palace, 224)

As the urban environment is often experienced as a restrictive system of rules by Auster’s protagonists, many of them voluntarily exile themselves from the big city. The (useless) quest is one of the leitmotifs in a number of his novels, also in the three discussed books. Whereas it is a kind of inward quest in *Oracle Night* and takes place mostly on the pages of Orr’s notebook, the main characters of *Moon Palace* and *The Music of Chance* literally embark upon quests of discovery. This theme runs through *Moon Palace* like a red thread, beginning with the protagonist’s name which is derived from three legendary explorers. It is also noteworthy that his family name had originally been Fogelman which probably alludes to the German word Vogel.<sup>112</sup> Above all, the novel is concerned with the image of the American West. The almost mythological picture of it is doubtlessly reinforced in the course of the story. At the same time, however, this cliché is obviously undermined. When Effing talks about the paintings of Thomas Moran who was the mentor of the young artist Julian Barber, later known as Thomas Effing, he says:

Moran got famous for what he did out there, he was the one who showed Americans what the West looked like [...] Manifest Destiny! They mapped it out, they made pictures of it, they digested it into the great American profit machine. Those were the last bits of the continent, the blank spaces no one had explored. [...] The golden spike, driven right through our hearts! (Moon Palace, 145)

This underlines his subversive attitude towards the American sense of its own history which, to him, is idealised and manipulated. Furthermore he points towards the commercialisation of the legendary American West, as the following statement demonstrates: Referring to his journey through the desert of Utah he remarks: “Everyone knows what those places look like now, you’ve seen them a hundred times yourself.” Tauntingly he adds: “That’s where they shoot all those cowboy-and-Indian movies, the goddamned Marlboro man gallops through there on television every night.” (Moon Palace, 152-153) Although it is merely a minor detail, it may be interesting in this context that in *The Music of Chance* Pozzi also buys an “oblong box of Marlboros” on the way to the house of the millionaires. Also the two main characters of this novel, Nashe and his companion Pozzi, are examples of the “American wanderer”. (Shiloh, 162) Comparable to Quinn’s endless wandering through New York,

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<sup>112</sup> See Shiloh, 128.

Nashe thus wants to achieve some clarity of thought. At the beginning of his solitary quest we hear:

Empty roads were always preferable to crowded roads. They demanded fewer slackening and decelerations, and because he did not have to pay attention to other cars, he could drive with the assurance that his thoughts would not be interrupted. (Music, 11)

The probably essential aspect of his driving is that it is ostensibly useless. In spite of that, exactly the aimlessness, the idea to “let himself drift for a while” (Music, 10) makes it useful to him because it constitutes a possibility to lose himself on the road. In this regard, a parallel can be drawn between Nashe and Fogg. Towards the end of *Moon Palace*, the latter is asked by his father to accompany him on his trip to Utah, in order to look for Effing’s legendary cave. Fogg comments on it with the words:

If I had thought that there was the slightest possibility of finding the cave, I doubt that I would have gone, but the idea of a useless quest, of setting out on a journey that was doomed to failure, appealed to my sense of things at that moment. We would search, but we would not find. Only the going itself would matter, and in the end we would be left with nothing but the futility of our own ambitions. This was a metaphor I could live with, the leap into emptiness I had always dreamed of. (Moon Palace, 279)

Hence, Barber and Fogg’s outward quest paradoxically symbolises their inward journey. Accordingly it also has the function of a thematic counterpart.<sup>113</sup> Another example of the juxtaposition of contraction and expansion is the conquest of the moon. Even Fogg draws this comparison and, referring to the tour of his uncle’s band, he says: “Uncle Victor and the Moon men traveling out West [...] why does the American West look so much like the landscape of the moon?” (Moon Palace, 32) This historical event takes place in the same summer in which the protagonist almost starves himself to death. Both the outward and the inward quest “involve the testing of human limits, but they proceed in inverse directions.” (Shiloh, 129) Thus Auster’s characters seem to be torn between the urge to move, whether they stray through the streets of the city or drive through the open landscape, and the desire to shut themselves off from the world in a closed space. Therefore, they appear to be continually on the move and yet at the same time searching for a place to stay. This again points out the influence of Kafka on the writing of Paul Auster because in his essay: “Pages for Kafka - on the fiftieth anniversary of his death” we hear:

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<sup>113</sup> See Shiloh, 129.

He wanders toward the promised land. That is to say: he moves from one place to another, and dreams continually of stopping. And because his desire to stop is what haunts him, is what counts most for him, he does not stop. That is to say: without the slightest hope of ever going anywhere [...] It is his road, and his alone. And yet on this road he is never free. (Art of Hunger, 23)

This seems to sum up the paradoxical and contradictory situation of the fictional characters in most of Auster's novels.

### 3.2.3.2. Confined rooms and solitude

Although the open space is opposed to the concept of the closed room, one can say that these two special categories basically have the same effect on the characters in Auster's books: both the driving and wandering and the complete isolation within confined spaces allow the protagonists to finally find their true identity. Solitude generally plays a central role in the novels of Paul Auster who, referring to this, remarks:

solitude is a rather complex term for me; it's not just a synonym for loneliness and isolation. Most people tend to think of solitude as a rather gloomy idea, but I don't attach any negative connotations to it. It's simply a fact, one of the conditions of human being, and even if we're surrounded by others, we essentially live our lives alone: real life takes place inside us [...] Our sense of self is formed by the pulse of consciousness within us – the endless monologue, the life-long conversation we have with ourselves. And this takes place in absolute solitude. (Art of Hunger, 299)

Hence, the distinction between closed and open spaces can be made only on a superficial level since "we're always in two places at the same time." (Art of Hunger, 299)

In *Moon Palace*, this may be demonstrated by Effing's self-induced confinement in a cave in the desert of Utah. Interestingly, this setting constitutes a combination of two extremes namely the narrowness of the small cave and the vastness of the desert. This further underlines that Auster playfully uses and subverts these special categories. Effing comments on it as follows:

All the bloody silence and emptiness. You try to find your bearings in it, but it's too big, the dimensions are too monstrous, and eventually it just stops being there. There's no world, no land, no nothing. It comes down to that, Fogg, in the end it's all a figment. The only place you exist is in your head. (Moon Palace, 152)

After the lethal accident of his comrade, he discovers a cave in which he finds the dead body of a hermit. Effing decides to take his place thus becoming a hermit himself. This may remind one of Ed Victory in *Oracle Night* whose apartment Orr compares to a "hermit's refuge." (Oracle Night, 65) In this context, the author also alludes to Thoreau's *Walden*. This novel certainly influenced a number of Auster's texts, especially the second part of *Moon Palace* because Thoreau's perception of solitude echoes Effing's: in both works it is understood as a means of self-creation and a kind of spiritual rebirth.<sup>114</sup> When Effing buries the dead man, he seemingly buries his former self Julian Barber, too. Hence, "he had found a new identity for himself, a new and utterly unexpected life. Just one hour before, he had been ready to die. Now he was trembling with happiness" (Moon Palace, 163). Similar to his grandson Fogg, he has to ration his food supply in order to stretch out the time he can stay in the cave. He, for example, also limits himself to one meal a day, thus "pushing himself to maintain the most rigorous discipline". Effing understands this as "a way of testing himself against his own weakness, and as the actual and the ideal gradually came closer, he could not help thinking of it as a personal triumph." (Moon Palace, 165) Additionally, his solitary life, surrounded by wild nature, is an artistic inspiration for him so that he is able to paint again. Consequently, he describes this time as the "happiest period of his life" (Moon Palace, 165) despite the fact that he experiences an "almost unbearable loneliness" (Moon Palace, 163) during the first weeks. Therefore, solitude is represented as a cruel torture but simultaneously it seems to be a necessary precondition for creativity. This idea runs through the majority of Auster's texts. Quinn in *City of Glass* encloses himself in a room and begins to write obsessively into his red notebook. Similarly, Black in *Ghosts* and Fanshawe in *The Locked Room* bold themselves in, in order to write. Another example is Sachs who shuts himself in a cabin in the woods attempting to compose *Leviathan*.<sup>115</sup> Finally, also Orr has to sit alone in his office when he wants to work on his narratives in *Oracle Night*. Thus lonesomeness could be even described as "the writer's ontological situation" (Shiloh, 140) in most of Auster's novels. Even Effing starts to write after he has used his last canvas and cannot paint anymore. As a consequence of this solitary activity he seems to completely cut himself off from human society. When there are no pages left to write on, Effing says that

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<sup>114</sup> See Shiloh, 21.

<sup>115</sup> See Shiloh, 140.

[c]ontrary to what he had been expecting, this did not dampen his spirits. He had descended so deeply into his solitude by then that he no longer needed any distractions. He found it almost unimaginable, but little by little the world had become enough for him. (Moon Palace, 168)

What this shows is that Effing, like Fogg, is caught in a kind of vicious circle because the longer he lives without company the less he recognises this circumstance. However, when he finally has his first ‘visitor’ George Ugly Mouth, things begin to change for him. Effing later tells his grandson that he had desperately tried to “built his solitude into something substantial, an absolute stronghold to delimit the boundaries of life”. After the encounter with the good-natured Indian George though, he finally understood “how artificial his situation was.” (Moon Palace, 172) With the term “artificial” he probably does not only refer, as he claims, to the fact that his hiding was obviously not safe anymore since “people knew where to find him”. He may also mean the unnaturalness of his solitary life as a whole. Hence, the result of this visit is Effing’s recognition of his loneliness. This implies that Effing begins to realise his connection to the world only when he must face his solitude which is, at least to a certain extent, self-induced. Auster sums up this paradox with the words:

What is so startling to me, finally, is that you don’t begin to understand your connection to others until you are alone. And the more intensely you are alone, the more deeply you plunge into a state of solitude, the more deeply you feel that connection. It isn’t possible for a person to isolate himself from other people. No matter how apart you might find yourself in a physical sense – whether you’ve been marooned on a desert island or locked up in solitary confinement – you discover that you are inhabited by others. (Art of Hunger, 301)

Another perhaps significant detail is the name of Fogg’s best friend Zimmer who is, as already mentioned, also the protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*. The name, which signifies “room” in German, may symbolise the solitude Fogg craves for at the beginning of the book.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, it is Zimmer who finally saves Fogg’s life and gives him a *room* to sleep in. This indicates that closed spaces stand for both loneliness and the rejection of the outer world, but also for security. This is underlined firstly by the example of Fogg’s retreat into the cave in Central Park and secondly by Effing’s hiding in the desert which, after finding an oasis near the cave, he describes as a “miniature pocket of life in the midst of overpowering barrenness.” (Moon Palace, 163)

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<sup>116</sup> See Shiloh, 57.



It is striking that *The Music of Chance* contains similar passages although the outer circumstances of the protagonist's confinement strongly differ from *Moon Palace*. When Nashe and Pozzi come to the meadow for the first time, Nashe

began to sense that he had already won back a measure of his freedom. Yes, the meadow was a desolate place; but there was also a certain forlorn beauty to it, an air of remoteness and calm that could almost be called soothing. Not knowing what else to think, Nashe tried to take heart from that. (Music, 106)

Nonetheless, their life in the meadow of the millionaires' mansion resembles imprisonment and thus stands in marked contrast to the self-confinement of Fogg and Effing. It takes some days for Nashe to recognise this. The fact that they are not allowed to use a car to move the heavy stones and have to cart them in a children's wagon further stresses the surreal atmosphere that prevails the second part of the novel. The two millionaires take several precautions in order to prevent their debtors from fleeing but "even more sinister was the chain-link fence" (Music, 114) Nashe and Pozzi discover one evening. This forces them to realise that they are kept like prisoners because "the barrier had been erected to keep things out, but now that it was there, what was to prevent it from keeping things in as well?" (Music, 115) With these words the paradoxical nature of confined spaces is underlined since, on the one hand, dangers can be locked out; on the other hand, there is always a danger to lock oneself in. Perhaps, a parallel can be drawn between Nashe and Pozzi's situation and the underground room in *Oracle Night*. As Ed Victory explains to Bowen, he

started building the room twenty years ago. Back in the fall of sixty-two, he says, in the middle of the Cuban missile crises. I thought they were going to drop the big one on us, and I figured I'd need a place to hide out in. [...] So I broke through the wall and added on that little room. The crisis was over before I finished, but you never know, do you? Those maniacs who run the world are capable of anything. (Oracle Night, 85)

Bowen later forgets the keys on the outside of the door and it can be assumed that he finally dies in this room. That could be labelled as 'tragic irony' because the fallout shelter, which was originally built to save lives, actually causes the death of a person. This ambiguity may underscore the postmodern aspect of Auster's writing since the paradox is a pivotal characteristic of postmodernism which is "contradictory and works within the same system it attempts to subvert." (Hutcheon, 4) Pozzi and Nashe react in two different ways to their situation: Pozzi, the younger and more impulsive of the two men, becomes increasingly aggressive. Nashe realises that this reaction was "not just acting out of innate subversiveness,

but responding to panic, to pent-up fears and confusion". Pozzi makes him think of a "cornered animal, waiting to strike at the first thing that approached it." (Music, 117) Nashe, by contrast, "welcomed the hardships of the meadow as a way to atone for his recklessness and self-pity". (Music, 116) Thus, they are not only observed from the outside but momentarily begin to watch each other, too. This, however, changes when their foreman Murks appears at their trailer carrying a gun which, in his eyes, "does have a way of adjusting the focus." (Music, 133) From this moment on it is clear to both Pozzi and Nashe that they are no more than slaves. Although they later recognise that their opponents have cheated them again, the latter refuses to flee together with his friend. He explains his decision to Pozzi as follows:

I promised myself I'd see it through to the end. I'm not asking you to understand it, but I'm just not going to run away. I've done too much of that already, and I don't want to live like that anymore. If I sneak out of here before the debt is paid off, I won't be worth a goddamned thing to myself. (Music, 151)

It could be assumed that this was the reason for him to accept the proposition of the millionaires in the first place. For Nashe, the confinement in the meadow seems to be a possibility to make up for his mistakes in the past. Hence, comparable to the rebirth of Julian Barber as Thomas Effing in the isolated cave in Utah, Nashe begins a new existence in this meadow. Apparently, he attempts to gain self-knowledge which seems to be of highest importance in all of Auster's novels and is achieved mostly in solitude where the "isolated individual [...] undertakes an inward quest. The end result of such an inward solitary quest is spiritual awareness and self-knowledge." (Martin, 72) But before he is able to achieve this goal at last, Nashe has to undergo a period in which he feels something akin to Effing's "unbearable loneliness". After the assumed death of Pozzi, he lives alone in the meadow. At this time he finds himself

more cut off from the world now than ever before, and there were times when he could feel something collapsing inside him, as if the ground he stood on were gradually giving way, crumbling under the pressure of his loneliness. The work continued, but that was a solitary business as well, and he avoided Murks as much as possible, refusing to speak to him except when it was absolutely necessary. (Music, 162)

One could easily draw a parallel between Effing's and Nashe's situation since both men suffer from the feeling of isolation and lonesomeness not until they find, and subsequently lose, a companion. Only after the loss of Pozzi, whom he nearly adopted as a son, Nashe comes to

realise that he has “cut himself off from the world”, especially from his daughter Juliette. It is thus no coincidence that he has these thoughts after reading a letter from his sister in which she assures him: “They all missed him terribly, and Juliette couldn’t wait to see him.” (Music, 162) Again, this example stresses Auster’s afore mentioned assumption that solitariness is a paradoxical condition because also Nashe learns that “when you truly enter a state of solitude, that is the moment when you are not alone anymore, when you start to feel your connection with others.” (Art of Hunger, 259)

### 3.2.3.3. From spatial to chronological order

Apparently, Auster’s works of fiction are mostly dominated by the different representations of space whereas time seems to play a subordinate role. A striking example is the depiction of the city as a postmodern urban space in which the spatial experience is foregrounded because the city is a space without history.<sup>117</sup> Even when the narrative deals with past events, like for instance Effing’s and Barber’s recounts of their life stories, the spatial element appears to be emphasised. In *Oracle Night*, however, a shift from the spatial to the chronological order can be observed. For the sake of completeness it has to be said though that this is not his only text that is concerned with the role of time. His autobiographical novel *The Invention of Solitude*, and especially its second section “The Book of Memory”, primarily deals with the power of time and memory. Auster remarks:

The central question in the second part was memory. So in some sense everything that happens in it is simultaneous. But writing is sequential, it unfolds over time. So my greatest problem was in trying to put things in the correct order.  
(Art of Hunger, 259)

Perhaps the same could be said about *Oracle Night*. The narrator Orr, for instance, frequently gives the exact date of each event which demonstrates his struggle to “put things in the correct order.” Thus the course of events is represented the way they present themselves to Orr. The structure of the novel may be compared to a map that projects the single stages of a journey as they are experienced by the traveller, as opposed to an image from the outside which depicts every point simultaneously, as it is frequently the case in modernist literature.<sup>118</sup> Hence, *Oracle Night* features a characteristic of postmodern literature which

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<sup>117</sup> See Woods, 120.

<sup>118</sup> See Connor, 123.

emphasizes “the contingent flow of temporarily [sic] at the expense of the atemporal stasis of metaphysics.” (Connor, 125)

Furthermore, the past seemingly functions as a means to understand one’s own identity. One example is the 3-D viewer which, according to John Trause, his old acquaintance Richard accidentally found in his garage. When he looked at the 3-D slides, he was astonished how well preserved the pictures were so that

[t]he longer he looked at the slides, Richard said, the more he felt that he could see the figures breathing. [...] After he’d looked at each slide once, he looked at them all again, and the second time around it gradually occurred to him that most of the people in the pictures were now dead. (Oracle Night, 34)

Trause describes the viewer as a “magic lantern that allowed him to travel through time and visit the dead.” (Oracle Night, 35) Unfortunately, after two months the machine gets broken. Trause sums up:

No viewer, no image. No image, no more time travel into the past. No more time travel, no more joy. Another round of grief, another round of sorrow – as if, after bringing them back to life, he had to bury the dead all over again. (Oracle Night, 35)

This seems to echo Auster’s depiction of memory in *The Invention of Solitude* because in this book the “act of recollection, in which events are replayed ad infinitum, comes to represent an extreme version of hell.” (Martin, 18) A., the protagonist of “The Book of Memory”, describes memory as the space in which one thing always happens twice.<sup>119</sup> Thus he emphasises the dualistic nature of recollection. The fact that Trause’s friend found the viewer by chance foregrounds the connection between memory and contingency. Hence, recollection is represented as something that happens unintentionally, maybe even comparable to Proust’s concept of ‘involuntary memory’.<sup>120</sup>

The following example probably demonstrates most clearly the pivotal role of time in *Oracle Night*. In his so called Flitcraft story, Orr juxtaposes two different life concepts: Nick Bowen, on the one side, describes himself to Ed Victory as the “man who was struck by lightning, remember? I’m dead, and whoever I used to be makes no difference anymore. The only thing that counts is now.” (Oracle Night, 66) He refers to the incident with the falling gargoyle head that almost killed him and after which he was “no more burdened by the past

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<sup>119</sup> See *Invention of Solitude*, 77.

<sup>120</sup> See *Mein*, 46.

than an infant is. He has memories, of course, but those memories are no longer relevant, no longer a part of the life that has begun for him". (Oracle Night, 59) Victory and his Bureau of Historical Preservation, on the other side, may represent the opposite model. As the name of his project already indicates, he attempts to preserve the past by collecting old telephone books. Significantly, Victory says:

I'm reorganizing my system. There's time, and there's space. Those are the only two possibilities. The current setup is geographic, spatial. Now I want to switch things around and make them chronological. It's a better way, and I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner. (Oracle Night, 67)

This statement seems to apply to the structure of the whole novel so that Paul Auster thus wittingly comments on the composition of his books.

In *Oracle Night*, time travel doesn't only occur on a metaphorical level, in the form of the 3-D viewer, but also in a literal sense. Orr's adaptation of *The Time Machine* is, as indicated before, a story about two time travellers. The reason, Orr explains, for the people of the future to visit the past is not the pleasure to see historical moments. It is an "initiation rite into adulthood" for when the traveller meets his antecedents he

will understand that he has come from an immense cauldron of contradictions[...] To be exposed to so many lives in such a short span of time is to gain a new understanding of yourself and your place in the world. [...] You understand, finally, that you alone are responsible for making yourself who you are. (Oracle Night, 111)

The story suggests that to concern oneself with the past is the only way to find one's own identity. At the same time though, this theory is put into question since Orr refers to the science fiction tale as "pure rubbish" (Oracle Night, 113). The possible consequences of time travel even appear to horrify him and he reflects:

In the end, all time would be tainted, thronged with interlopers and tourists from other ages [...] the nature of time would change. Instead of being a continuous progression of discrete moments inching forward in one direction only, it would crumble into a vast, synchronistic blur. Simply put, as soon as one person began to travel in time, time as we know it would be destroyed. (Oracle Night, 109)

These examples stress the argument that *Oracle Night* is deeply concerned with the nature of memory and time. This may stand in contrast to the postmodernist concept of 'non-time' established in his earlier novels, especially in *The New York Trilogy*. At the beginning of

*Ghosts* we hear: “The place is New York, the time is the present, and neither one will ever change.” (Ghosts, 7) This a-temporality is a characteristic feature of the three books of the *Trilogy* and can be observed in other works as well: The second part of *The Music of Chance* is marked by a sense of stasis. Seemingly, time brings no change and Nashe and Pozzi’s work appears senseless and doesn’t lead to their liberation. One can compare this “deconstruction of temporality” (Shiloh, 7) to Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* or Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. In these works, the plot is “suspended in an eternal present” (Shiloh, 59) whereas the interaction of past and future is one of the major themes of *Oracle Night*.

### 3.2.4. Art and literature

The work of other artists has always influenced Auster’s writing which is, as already noted, generally a characteristic of postmodernist fiction. But apart from various literary texts and pieces of music, works of graphic art have a crucial meaning in a number of his novels.

This can be certainly observed in regard to *Moon Palace*. In this narrative, art is represented by Fogg’s grandfather Effing whose real name is Julian Barber. He worked as a painter before he made the decision to change his identity, trying to overcome his dreadful experiences in the desert of Utah which “brand him with guilt and mark the beginning of his downfall” (Shiloh, 130). It may be called tragic irony that he, of all people, later loses his eyesight. The old man hires - unwittingly - his grandson, not only to write his obituary but also to describe the visible world to him. He even forces Fogg to visit the Brooklyn Museum in order to look at Blakelock’s painting bearing the highly symbolic title *Moonlight*. Effing instructs his grandson thus:

[On the way to the museum] I want you to keep your eyes shut. Think about as little as you can – nothing, if possible – and if that’s too much to ask, then think about your eyes and the extraordinary power you possess to see the world. Imagine what would happen if you couldn’t see it. (Moon Palace, 130)

This work is a significant symbol in the story because it seems to combine important themes of the novel as the following will show. At first, however, Fogg is disappointed when he sees it for the first time. He notes:

I don’t know what I had been expecting – something grandiose, perhaps some loud and garish display of superficial brilliance – but certainly not the somber

little picture I found before me. [...] I was not disappointed in the painting so much as I was disappointed in myself for having misread Effing. This was a deeply contemplative work, a landscape of inwardness and calm, and it confused me to think that it could have said anything to my mad employer. (Moon Palace, 133)

Blakelock's *Moonlight* thus may be understood as a key to Effing's true self. Moreover, it seems to stand for both Effing's past and the American history. Fogg, after looking at the picture for more than an hour, recognises that this may have been the reason for sending him to the museum in the first place. Blakelock's work basically shows a romantic campfire scene with an Indian tepee and the moon placed at the centre of the canvas. It strikes Fogg that the sky is painted in green colour and that the Indians "appear to be at peace with themselves". He wonders if

Blakelock hadn't painted his sky green in order to emphasize this harmony, to make a point of showing the connection between heaven and earth. [...] I was only guessing, of course, but it struck me that Blakelock was painting an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came to destroy it [...] Perhaps, I thought to myself, this picture was meant to stand for everything we had lost. It was not a landscape, it was a memorial, a death song for a vanished world. (Moon Palace, 135)

Therefore, this work of art may symbolise Effing's lost innocence since he feels responsible for the death of his young comrade on their mutual journey through the desert. Another reason may be that he had to kill the group of outlaws who attacked him. At the same time, *Moonlight* could be a reflection of America's sin against the Indians.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, the artist Blakelock himself has actually been ignored in the annals of history<sup>122</sup> so that he constitutes another historical figure at the margins of society. In this sense, one can even describe him as Effing's alter ego which further underlines the pivotal role of the painting. In this context it is necessary to add that Paul Auster published a study of Blakelock's "Moonlight" in the Brooklyn Museum" in the September issue 1987 of *Art News*. As might be expected, there are a number of similarities between Fogg's observations and Auster's analysis.<sup>123</sup>

Effing distances himself from the art movements that were fashionable when he was a young painter and states:

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<sup>121</sup> See Shiloh, 131.

<sup>122</sup> See Martin, 71.

<sup>123</sup> See Weisenburger 137.

The Fauves, the Cubists, I got wind of that stuff when I was young [...] Mechanical abstraction, the canvas as the world, intellectual art – I saw it as a dead end. I was a colorist, and my subject was space, pure space and light. (Moon Palace, 145)

His statement appears highly ironic considering the fact that *The New York Trilogy* has been repeatedly compared to Cubist paintings with their “peeling textures, washed out colour, and flattened space.” (Bilton, 67) That further stresses the contrast between the highly postmodern and post-structuralist form of the *Trilogy* and the comparably realistic style of *Moon Palace*.

In *Oracle Night* the connection between art and literature is maybe even more obvious. It can be argued that Orr, working as an author, represents the world of words whereas his wife Grace personifies the visual aspect. They got to know each other because she had been assigned to design the cover of one of his books. Orr refers to that incident: “In some sense, art had made our marriage possible, and without the intervention of art, I doubt that I would have found her.” (Oracle Night, 50) Although both of them share an interest in art, he appears to be fascinated by language rather than images. Orr admits that he had “stolen” the title of his book from a small pencil drawing by Willem de Kooning called *Self-Portrait with Imaginary Brother* but he adds: “much as I admired the drawing, it was the title that interested me, and I had used it not because I wanted to refer to de Kooning but because of the words themselves [...]” (Oracle Night, 51) To the same extent his wife has to respect his affinity for the world of language, he must “accept the line she’d drawn between herself and words.” (Oracle Night, 52) Whereas this shows their different characters, it may demonstrate the interaction of art and literature, too. This connection can be further underlined by the following two statements of Paul Auster: In his essay “Northern Lights” about Jean-Paul Riopelle he describes the artist as “a painter who paints in the same way that he breathes. He has never sought merely to create beautiful objects, but rather, in the act of painting, to make life possible for himself.” (Art of Hunger, 187-188) Referring to his own work he states in an interview:

I often wonder why I write. It’s not simply to create beautiful objects or entertaining stories. It’s an activity I seem to need in order to stay alive. I feel terrible when I’m not doing it. It’s not that writing brings me a lot of pleasure – but not doing it is worse. (Art of Hunger, 269)



It is remarkable that Effing repeats Auster's words almost verbatim when he muses about the nature of art in general. Indirectly quoted by Fogg he says that by living alone in the desert and painting for himself he realised that the

true purpose of art was not to create beautiful objects [...] It was a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it, and whatever aesthetic qualities an individual canvas might have were almost an incidental by-product of the effort to engage oneself in this struggle, to enter into the thick of things. (Moon Palace, 166)

These passages probably make clear that Auster understands the creation of an artistic work - be it a piece of music, a work of visual art or a literary text - as a necessity in order to survive. This probably idealised depiction of the artist and can be found in almost all of his novels. Apparently, it is merely the truly creative act that interests him. This can be observed also by another parallel between Orr's profession and Riopelle's: "Painting: or the desire to vanish in the act of seeing. That is to say, to see the thing that is, and each time to see it for the first time, as if it were the last time that he would ever see." (Art of Hunger, 185) Sydney Orr's 'disappearance' in his blue notebook is perhaps based on that idea, just as Fogg's translation of visual impressions into words to make Effing "see things for himself." (Moon Palace, 119) Auster's point, therefore, may be that seeing, or rather observing, the world is the essential precondition for the act of writing. This argument will be underlined with a final example. In Auster's essay "The Decisive Moment" on the American poet Charles Reznikoff he remarks that

[s]eeing, in his poetry, always comes before speech. Each poetic utterance is an emanation of the eye, a transcription of the visible into the brute, undeciphered code of being [...] The poet must learn to speak from his eye - and cure himself from seeing with his mouth. (Art of Hunger, 35)

Apart from that, in Auster's novels a piece of art is frequently depicted as a means to gain an understanding of one's identity and to mature. Comparable to the books read by many of his adolescent protagonists, Grace is affected by the paintings of van Velde. Orr says about the abstract painting she purchased as a student on her first trip to Paris:

Grace had bought the piece in instalments with her own money, skimping on food and other necessities in order to stay within the allowance sent each month by her father. The litograph was an important part of her youth, an emblem of her growing passion for art as well as a sign of independence - a bridge between the

last days of her girlhood and her first days as an adult – and it meant more to her than any other object she owned. (Oracle Night, 162)

In this sense, the painting is comparable to the novels Victor gives to his nephew Fogg since “[...] all of them contain words. If you read those words, perhaps they will help you with your education.” (Moon Palace, 13) He probably doesn’t refer to the young man’s school education alone but to the acquisition of maturity and independence. Hence, like many (postmodernist) authors, Auster stresses the interaction of works from various artistic fields and their crucial role in the development of a character’s personality.

### **3.3. Postmodern techniques of characterisation**

It is, as already mentioned earlier, difficult to assign the novels of Paul Auster to a specific category or genre. But most people may agree on the statement that the personal development of the fictional characters is at the core of his works. It can be argued that the author frequently uses techniques of characterisation which adhere to the tenets of postmodern fiction. This will be proven by the following three points.

#### **3.3.1. The protagonist**

Apparently, most of Auster’s narratives are constructs built around the central character of the protagonist. This should not indicate, however, that aspects like plot, structure and literary style can be neglected, but certainly the role of the main character in his narratives has to be emphasised. Instead of discussing each of the three novels separately, it is probably more useful to give an overview of the different features their protagonists share. It must be added at this point that all of Auster’s main characters are male, with only one exception namely Anna Blume, the heroine of *In the Country of Last Things*. For this reason the protagonist is referred to by the word “he” in the following.

Due to the impression that Auster’s works are dominated by recurring character types, especially by similar main characters, some critics persistently maintain that these figures are fictional versions of himself. The author though denies any direct correspondences between the characters in his books and himself although he concedes that his texts contain certain episodes from his own life. Auster even plays with the expectation of the reader who hopes

to discover hidden autobiographical elements. Apparently, he thus employs a postmodern literary device because “[i]n contrast to the former all-powerful author, Auster relinquishes responsibility and assumes the role of a facilitator.” (Martin, 23) Mostly the reader is not able to decide whether the protagonist articulates the thoughts of his creator or if Auster indirectly mocks the follies of the hero. A striking example is *Moon Palace* which is M.S. Fogg’s autobiography, narrated retrospectively by his older self. Therefore, the young protagonist’s thoughts are echoed by the narrator who is in turn a fictional creation of Auster. This shows that, in a way, the novel becomes the property of his characters<sup>124</sup> who should not be mistaken for alter egos of their creator. Hence, in spite of a number of autobiographical elements regarding the plot, the main characters have to be seen as Auster’s invention. This may be underlined by a passage from *Oracle Night*, in which we can follow Orr’s creation of the main character of his story. He says:

I saw my Flitcraft as a man named Nick Bowen. He’s in his mid thirties, works as an editor in a large New York publishing house, and is married to a woman named Eva. Following the example of Hammet’s prototype, he is necessarily good at his job, admired by his colleagues and, financially secure, happy in his marriage, and so on.” (*Oracle Night*, 13)

In a similar way, this may indicate, Auster “saw” the protagonist of his book as a man named Sidney Orr, probably also modelled on some “prototype”. He thus consciously destroys the illusion of reality and contests that the character in the novel is a fictional counterpart of himself.

Certainly, *Moon Palace* is a special case in this regard since it is written in the form of an autobiography. Thus it lends itself to the assumption that it is a fictionalized version of the author’s real life. This, however, can be confuted by the following statement: In an interview Auster clarifies that *Moon Palace* “sounds more like an autobiography than any of my other novels, but the truth is that it’s probably the least autobiographical novel I’ve ever written.” (*Art of Hunger*, 273) In contrast to that, *The Music of Chance* does not have the form of an autobiography so it doesn’t provoke speculations of this kind. It is likely that Jim Nashe was modelled on various other paragons and not on the author Paul Auster.

Another feature shared by most of the protagonists is that they continually call into question or lose their own identity. The probably most striking example is Quinn in *City of Glass* who accepts his new identity as the detective Paul Auster. At first, this seems to give his life a

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<sup>124</sup> See Martin, 23.

new meaning but soon he has to realise that it is not possible to “borrow purpose and meaning like a hat”. (Barone, 16) Quinn decides to play the role of the detective and consequently begins to look obsessively for Stillman. This eventually leads to a blurring of the boundary between himself and his role. Similarly, if only in a weakened form, Fogg has to literally slip into the clothes of Pavel Shum, Thomas Effing’s assistant and friend. He needs to take Shum’s place not only to support his grandfather in practical terms but also to fill the void in Effing’s emotional life after the death of his best friend. Secondly, Fogg pays homage to his late uncle Victor by wearing his jacket. This may demonstrate that the protagonists in Auster’s works are continually looking for their so-called true self so that the hero is frequently only “dimly aware” (Oracle Night, 193) of who he is. He seems to constantly reflect on himself which is an intrinsically postmodern characteristic. This may be explained by the fact that, in contrast to modernist authors who

carry on the process of reflection with the clearly marked intention of attaining a result [...] postmodernist writers know that there is no ultimate knowledge, no single truth, no discrete reality, no significant identity [...] they dramatize reflection as if it occurred more or less outside the character on a matrix of ambiguities and contradictions. (Hoffmann, 504)

Hence, the search for identity is a never-ending process which is necessary in order to remain true to oneself.<sup>125</sup> It must be noted at this point, however, that not all of Auster’s characters show a tendency to reflect on their life and their personality. Nashe, for example, has little in common with Orr and Fogg, at least in this respect. Auster points out that he “doesn’t indulge in such mental gymnastics. [...] He’s a much more straightforward person, and consequently the book he appears in is a much simpler story.” (Art of Hunger, 309) Auster’s comment appears significant in a twofold sense: Firstly, it makes clear that the narrative as a whole depends to a great extent on the representation of the main character. Furthermore, it implies that the protagonist’s profession and education are factors that have to be considered as well. Nashe, according to Auster a “straight forward person”, works as a fire fighter. Hence, he is not an academic like Fogg who, as already pointed out, shows a resemblance to the hero of Hamsun’s novel *Hunger*. At least at the beginning of *Moon Palace*, the young student Fogg, like Hamsun’s protagonist, may be described as a “monster of intellectual arrogance” (Art of Hunger, 11). He is obsessed with the power of writing and language in general and is “a bookish young man, an intellectual, and has a penchant for this kind of thing.” (Art of Hunger, 308) He indeed appears to be a rather complicated personality who

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<sup>125</sup> See Martin, 76.

tends to perpetually question himself and the world. Seemingly, this applies also to the protagonist of *Oracle Night*. As a writer, Orr is even obliged to critically reflect on his environment. To name only one further example, David Zimmer, the main character of *The Book of Illusions*, in the course of his project also isolates himself from the world in order to gain self-knowledge. Like Orr, he is literally drawn into the story he writes, namely the biography of the comedian Hector Mann. Hence, Zimmer is another writer figure with a tendency to self-examination.

The final point that may be significant for this discussion is the role other characters play in the life of the protagonist. It is striking that the main character mostly attempts to find his true self by shutting himself off from the world but eventually recognises that his desire can be answered only by fellow beings. Auster seems to anchor his characters by their connection to others<sup>126</sup> which echoes Saussure's well known theory of the sign. According to him the "value of any semiotic element can only be discerned with reference to all other structures of the system from which the given element differs." (Figge, 37) The main characters are not only influenced and even determined by others but, in most of Auster's stories, they are mirrored by another person, a so called "döppelgänger" (sic) (Martin, 1). In each of the three discussed novels, examples can be found to underline this argument: When Fogg encounters his later girlfriend for the first time, he is introduced to a group of people as "Kitty's twin brother" (Moon Palace, 34). Also the two main characters of *The Music of Chance* pretend to be brothers or, more precisely, "half-brothers. Same mother, different fathers." (Music, 63) In spite of their different personalities, there is actually a remarkable similarity between Pozzi and Nashe, especially regarding their family histories.<sup>127</sup> Finally, the hero of *Oracle Night* seems to have a doppelgänger, too - and, as in *Moon Palace*, it is the partner of the protagonist who apparently represents his counterpart. Throughout the whole novel, Orr refers to his wife Grace as a kind of soul mate. Ironically, she designs the cover for his book with the title *Self-Portrait with Imaginary Brother*<sup>128</sup> which may imply that they are related to each other like sister and brother.

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<sup>126</sup> See Barone, 12.

<sup>127</sup> See Martin, 56.

<sup>128</sup> See *Oracle Night*, 15.

### 3.4.2. The ex-centric old man

What in the following chapter will be called the 'ex-centric old man' is a kind of character that occurs in a number of Auster's narratives. The so called ex-centric is one of the key-concepts of Linda Hutcheon's theories on postmodern literature. According to her, postmodern art and theory continually subvert, as she calls it, the "center" which is synonymous with order and unity. She defines the concept thus:

The ex-centric, the off center: ineluctably identified with the center it desires but is denied. This is the paradox of the postmodern and its images are often as deviant as this language of decentering might suggest. (Hutcheon, 60-61)

One of her examples of such an ex-centric character is the 'freak' who is a contradictory and immensely ambiguous figure. Auster's ex-centric old men seem to feature these characteristics as well. A striking example is Peter Stillman's father in *City of Glass* who had to serve twenty years in prison after abusing his son in a bizarre language experiment. The alleged narrator Quinn gets the instruction to follow him after his release, but he has to realise that there are two men who look like the person on the old photograph, two Stillmans, so to say. They, however, differ in terms of clothing and eventually both men go off in two different directions which forces Quinn to make the decision which of them to follow. This hints at something which is confirmed by the subsequent events in the story namely that Stillman is an absolutely ambiguous character. It will be shown in the following that in the three discussed novels, Auster uses characters that, at least to some extent, resemble this Stillman figure.

There is certainly a striking similarity between the eccentric Stillman and Thomas Effing. When his grandson Fogg sees his new employer for the first time, he describes him as the "frailest person I had ever seen. All bones and trembling flesh, he sat in his wheelchair covered in plaid blankets, his body slumped to one side like some miniscule broken bird." (Moon Palace, 96) The eighty-six year old Effing is obviously paralysed and blind, or "at least he pretended to be blind" (ibid.). Fogg's statement already anticipates the insight that his first impression, except Effing's blindness, was wrong. He concludes that the old man carries two faces. When Effing suddenly straightens himself up in his chair Fogg says:

It was remarkable how quickly this transformed his appearance. [...] So much of his character was built on falsehood and deception, it was nearly impossible to know when he was telling the truth. He loved to trick the world with his sudden experiments and inspirations, and of all the stunts he pulled, the one he liked best was playing dead. (Moon Palace, 98)

This demonstrates that there are, one could say, two Effings which highlights the parallel between him and Stillman. The figure of Thomas Effing is perhaps inspired by the eccentric habits of the novelist H.L. Hume who also served as a model for Willy Christmas in *Timbuktu*.<sup>129</sup> The author actually seems to be fascinated by this kind of personality, probably for the very reason that it is such an unpredictable character: On the one side, Effing's behaviour can be interpreted as the antics of an old man; on the other side, he appears to be in possession of inexplicable powers. Fogg notes that he was

torn between reading a dark purpose into his actions and dismissing them as the products of random impulse [...] [At times I saw] Effing as crackpot spiritual guide, as an eccentric master struggling to initiate me into the secrets of the world. At other times [...] he struck me as nothing more than a vicious old man, a burnt-out maniac living in the borderland between madness and death. (Moon Palace, 105)

Effing is not only what can be called a round character, thus not one-dimensional, but he seems to have some kind of double consciousness. Fogg is never able to reach a conclusion about his "true self" except that "it was impossible to exclude either alternative. Effing was both things at once." (Moon Palace, 114) This ambivalence may be stressed by the fact that Effing, due to his physical weakness, is helpless, but at the same time, he appears to be omniscient and almighty. He says about himself that behind everything he does, there is a hidden purpose<sup>130</sup> and finally proves that he controls the course of things by predicting his own death. It is interesting that this incident is related to a broken umbrella which causes a lethal disease. This may be an allusion to *City of Glass*: Stillman senior who, reflecting on the various features of human language, points out that although a broken umbrella has lost its function it is still called an umbrella. In his eyes, this demonstrates that "language as an instrument through which man names his world is distorted and falsified." (Sorapure, 81) On top of this, Effing does not only accurately prophesy the day of his death, but also consciously arranges its circumstances. Before he and his grandson go out for their evening

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<sup>129</sup> See Bilton, 77.

<sup>130</sup> See Moon Palace, 102.

walk, he secretly changes his umbrella for a broken one. It actually starts to rain “as if inevitably, as if Effing had willed the drops to fall.” (Moon Palace, 206) Fogg realises that the old man had planned the events in advance in order to get himself sick and that he wants to die. In the middle of the downpour Effing shouts: “It smells like rain. It sounds like rain. It even tastes like rain. And yet we’re perfectly dry. It’s mind over matter, Fogg. We’ve finally done it! We’ve cracked the secret of the universe!” (Moon Palace, 208) These words seem to constitute the quintessence of his behaviour since obviously he attempts to control the course of things. In this point he contradicts the conclusion his grandson draws who literally attempts to separate himself from his body by refusing to eat. Fogg discovers that “the mind cannot win over matter, for once the mind is asked to do too much, it quickly shows itself to be matter as well.” (Moon Palace, 29) In this regard, one can see a parallel between *Moon Palace* and Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* which, according to Auster, “can be read as a parable (of sorts) about the efforts of the human mind to impose an arbitrary order on the world.” (Art of Hunger, 167) This is a character trait that Effing shares with all of the so called ex-centrics in Auster’s novels which will be demonstrated in the following.

In spite of numerous similarities between Effing and the two ex-centric characters of *The Music of Chance*, Flower and Stone, there is a crucial difference: although Fogg considers his old employer selfish and arrogant, at least temporarily, it is necessary to note that in the course of his employment, he develops an emotional relationship to Effing. His grandfather later even bequeaths a part of his fortune to Fogg. Of course, the relationship between the millionaires and their debtors Nashe and Pozzi is not comparable to this one. However, certain features of their character are strongly reminiscent of Effing’s eccentric antics. One of them concerns their eating habits. Before they begin with the poker game, Nashe and Pozzi are invited to eat dinner with their hosts. At first, Nashe is surprised to see that his placemat is a plastic novelty item, apparently from the 1950, but he interprets this as a self-conscious joke of the two millionaires. Then, however, the food is brought in and

[t]he meal turned out to be no more than a kiddie banquet, a dinner for six-year-olds: hamburger patties on white, untoasted buns, bottles of Coke with plastic straws sticking out of them, potato chips, corn on the cob, and a ketchup dispenser in the shape of a tomato. [...] To make matters worse, Flower ate with his paper napkin tucked under his chin. (Music, 80)

Effing’s behaviour could remind one of a small child rather than a grown up man. As Fogg recounts he



didn't eat much, but the little he did eat was consumed in a mad free-for-all of slobbering grunts and spills [...] he let the food dribble out of his mouth and down his chin, burping, feigning nausea and heart attacks, removing his false teeth and putting them on the table. (Moon Palace, 109)

The similarity becomes even more striking when he says that everyday "the bib would be tied around Effing's neck before the meal began, and the towel would be used for wiping his face in sudden emergencies." (Moon Palace, 111) These passages may emphasise that despotism frequently goes hand in hand with infantilism. The assumption is underscored by Flower and Stone's mansion that also combines an air of evil and a childish banality. In this regard, it is comparable to the castle in Kafka's same-named novel.<sup>131</sup>

Apart from that, Nashe's first impression of the two millionaires turns out to be a misjudgement, too. Like Fogg, he and Pozzi at first underestimate their opposites. Prior to their first encounter with the millionaires, Pozzi describes them as a "regular comedy team. Like those little buggers on TV, Ernie and Bert. Only these guys are called Willie and Bill." (Music, 28-29) In spite of the resemblance of their first names, the two men seem to have entirely different characters. Whereas Flower "was all agitation and lunging goodwill", Nashe feels that "there was something crude about him [...] some edge of anxiety that made him appear to be at odds with himself." In contrast to him, Stone "was a simpler and gentler sort of person, a man without airs who sat comfortably inside his own skin." But, as Nashe concedes, "those were only first impressions." (Music, 64) However, he has to notice very soon that both Flower and Stone regard themselves as elected by God, or even as godlike beings. Recounting the tale of their lottery winning, Flower self-confidently declares:

It's as though God has singled us out from other men. He's showered us with good fortune and lifted us to the heights of happiness. I know this might sound presumptuous to you, but at times I feel that we've become immortal."  
(Music, 68)

Hence, just as Effing they attempt to crack "the secret of the universe". At this point of the novel, Flower's declaration appears preposterous and seems to underline the impression that the millionaires are merely a pair of grotesque misfits. As the further course of the story shows, this does not hold true. After seeing Stone's so called City of the World and Flower's collection of historical memorabilia

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<sup>131</sup> See Shiloh, 184.

Nashe no longer knew what to think. At first he had taken Flower and Stone for a pair of amiable eccentrics – a trifle daft, perhaps, but essentially harmless – but the more he saw of them and listened to what they said, the more uncertain his feelings had become. Sweet little Stone, for example, whose manner was so humble and benign, turned out to spend his days constructing a model of some bizarre, totalitarian world. [...] With Flower, too, everything was ambiguous, difficult to pin down. One moment, he seemed perfectly sensible; the next moment, he sounded like a lunatic, rambling on like an out-and-out madman. (Music, 79)

It is exactly this ambiguity that leads to the unsettling atmosphere because the millionaires never show their 'true face'. Like Effing, they seem to play with different identities whereas Pozzi and Nashe are kept in a state of uncertainty. Henceforth, Flower and Stone fulfil the criteria of ex-centric characters because they continually fluctuate between reality and the imaginary.<sup>132</sup> After the poker game they are suddenly literally vanished. From this point on, the men seemingly control the whole situation from the position of an omniscient and omnipotent observer. Apparently they have become a sort of deity and know the course of events in advance. The following may be an example of their nearly godlike power: In order to earn some extra money after their debt has been paid off, Pozzi and Nashe demand a so called rider to their working contract in which the exact conditions should be set out in writing. To their surprise, Murks presents a paper to them which turns out to be a copy of the new clause, already signed by Flower and Stone. Nashe feels startled because he and his friend "hadn't even come to a decision until last night, and yet here were the results of that decision already waiting for them". He despondently concludes: "It was as if Flower and Stone had been able to read their thoughts, as if they had known what they would do before they knew it themselves." (Music, 138)

The millionaires in some way resemble one of the protagonists of the – by now repeatedly mentioned - novel *Life: A User's Manual* by Georges Perec. Auster refers to the central character Percival Bartlebooth as an "eccentric English millionaire whose insane and useless fifty-year project serves as an emblem for the book as a whole." (Art of Hunger, 165) This Bartlebooth is a painter who hires a professional puzzle-maker to turn his works into an enormous jigsaw-puzzle. One can see this as a parallel between him and Stone who, an eccentric millionaire himself, also plans to spend the rest of his life working on his project, the City of the World. This model "serves as an emblem for the book as a whole", too.

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<sup>132</sup> See Hutcheon, 61.

The last point of this section is concerned with the character Ed Victory in *Oracle Night*. When Orr's fictional hero Bowen lands at the airport in Kansas City, he is brought to the Hyatt hotel by a taxi driver, "a corpulent black man with the unlikely name of Ed Victory." In spite of his name, he may be the exact opposite of a winner. In contrast to Effing and the couple Flower and Stone, Victory's living conditions are poor. Orr describes the old man's living area as

one of the worst parts of town, a fringe neighbourhood of crumbling, abandoned warehouses and burned out buildings [...] a sliver of hell, a no-man's land strewn with empty wine bottles, spent needles, and the hulks of stripped-down, rusted cars. (*Oracle Night*, 63)

Hence, Victory can be called an ex-centric figure in a twofold sense: firstly, considering his social situation and his ethnic background, he obviously represents the so called margins of society. This "more plural and deprivileging concept of difference" (Hutcheon, 65) is one of the major features of the postmodern ex-centric. However, it should be noted that apparently neither his social status nor his skin colour are foregrounded. Instead, the core of Orr's story seems to be Victory's collection of old telephone books. The Bureau of Historical Preservation constitutes his passion and life task. Comparable to Flower's memorabilia collection and Stone's model city, but also to Stillman's manic wandering, the Bureau becomes an obsession. Like these projects, it has the function of a highly significant symbol but at the same time appears merely as a meaningless and absurd eccentricity. This also influences the judgment of Victory's character since an eccentric identity is mostly unstable because all the signs that constitute it are arbitrary.<sup>133</sup> The following passage may point this out rather clearly: After Victory has explained to him why he began to collect telephone books, Bowen

can grasp the enormity of what Ed lived through, sympathize with the anguish and horror that continue to haunt him, but how those feelings found expression in the mad enterprise of collecting telephone books eludes his understanding. (*Oracle Night*, 83)

These first doubts concerning the mental condition of his new employer are reinforced when Victory tells him about the extra room which has been constructed as a shelter from the "maniacs who run the world". Bowen feels

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<sup>133</sup> See Renner, 147.

a slight flush of alarm when he hears Ed talk like this. Not that he doesn't share his opinion about the rulers of the world, but he wonders now if he hasn't joined forces with an unhinged person, a destabilized and/or demented crank.  
(Oracle Night, 85)

This question is, as usually in Auster's novels, not cleared up. Hence, until the end of this episode Ed Victory remains a character carrying two faces which is the second reason for referring to him as an ex-centric old man.

### 3.3.3. Father and son relationship

Although friendship and love play a crucial role in the lives of Auster's fictional characters, it can be claimed that some of the texts are dominated by the complex relationships between fathers and sons. The issue is related to the search for one's origins, one of the key motifs in Paul Auster's writing in general. This applies also to *In the Country of Last Things*, the only novel so far with a female main character. Anna Blume, the heroine of this book, is searching for her lost brother which is certainly comparable to the desire for one's father. Another example is Blue, the protagonist of *Ghosts*, who becomes obsessed with narratives that deal with father and son relationships in order to compensate his own father's absence.<sup>134</sup> It will be shown in the following that this aspect is also of great importance in the three discussed novels, most of all in the first example, *Moon Palace*.

One could even go so far as to say that the emotional bond between a man and his father is the central issue of *Moon Palace*, a novel about the

cyclical nature of human experience. There are three stories in the book, after all, and each one is finally the same. Each generation repeats the mistakes of the previous generation. So it's also a critique of the notion of progress. And if America is the land of progress, what are we to make of ourselves then?  
(Art of Hunger, 310)

The author's remark emphasises the symbolical meaning of this genealogical structure. Apart from that, the biographical aspect must not be overlooked. The trilogy of father, son and grandson corresponds to the history of Auster's own family<sup>135</sup> since the death of his father has been a defining experience in his life. The "cyclical nature of human experience" is

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<sup>134</sup> See Martin, 118.

<sup>135</sup> See Martin, 91.

accentuated by the correspondences in the lives of the three male protagonists. Evidently, the underlying philosophy of *Moon Palace* is that generally human existence cannot be described in the form of a straight line, instead it resembles a circle. At the beginning of the novel, this theory is formulated by Fogg's uncle Victor with the following words: "Everything works out in the end, you see, everything connects. The nine circles. The nine planets. The nine innings. Our nine lives. Just think of it. The correspondences are infinite." (*Moon Palace*, 13)

Firstly, these correspondences become clear in regard to M.S. Fogg and Salomon Barber. Apart from the fact that the former is associated with the moon and his father with the sun, the impression that they represent two sides of the same coin can be underlined by a further example: They share the same obsession with food, whereas Fogg's starvation and Barber's gluttony are inverse expressions of this obsession<sup>136</sup> and it may show their wish to make themselves invisible, to literally disappear. More precisely, his son retreats into himself by refusing to eat and Barber does the same by not stopping to do so. Recounting his father's story, Fogg says: "The larger his body grew, the more deeply he buried himself inside it. Barber's goal was to shut himself off from the world, to make himself invisible in the massiveness of his own flesh." (*Moon Palace*, 235) The similarity between his behaviour and his son's self-imposed starvation is stressed by a statement of Fogg's uncle Victor. He tells his nephew about an enormously obese man he once saw in a restaurant in Cleveland. It can be assumed that this man, "a portrait of pure and unadulterated unhappiness", was Solomon Barber. Victor remarks: "Anyone who eats like that is trying to kill himself. [...] It's the same thing as watching a man starve to death." (*Moon Palace*, 240) Moreover, their shared obsession with food can be compared to their affection for words. Auster points towards this parallel in his essay "New York Babel". He writes:

There is a fundamental connection between speaking and eating [...] Speech is a strangeness, an anomaly, a biologically secondary function of the mouth, and myths about language are often linked to the idea of food. [...] It is as if the life-serving function of the mouth, its role in eating, had been transferred to speech, for it is language that creates us and defines us as human beings.  
(*Art of Hunger*, 33)

In addition to that, both men grow up without knowing their father who consequently becomes a mystified figure that haunts their existence.<sup>137</sup> Thus the longing for the absent father becomes the quintessence of their lives.

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<sup>136</sup> See Shiloh, 128.

<sup>137</sup> See Martin, 88.

The similarities between M.S. Fogg and Effing may be even more striking to the reader. Like the uncle, Effing serves as a kind of surrogate father for his grandson. The lives of these two men seem to mirror each other so that Fogg is not only his grandfather's progenitor but could be also described as his doppelganger. The following example may strengthen this argument: As mentioned above, Fogg is forced to live in the Central Park after being dismissed from his apartment. When he is unexpectedly caught in a thunderstorm he finds shelter under a ledge of rocks. This may remind one of the desert cave Effing hides in after the tragic death of his young comrade Byrne. As it seems, the cave is a symbol for transformation and rebirth in the life of both men. This parallel is emphasised by the fact that, lying in his shelter, the delirious Fogg repeatedly pronounces the words "Indian summer". Then he "suddenly began to dream of Indians. It was 350 years ago, and I saw myself following a group of half-naked men through the forests of Manhattan." (Moon Palace, 68) This allusion to America's so called Wild West not only echoes *Kepler's Blood*, the fantastic narrative of his father, but also his grandfather's experiences in the desert. But whereas Fogg loses three father figures in the course of his life, namely his uncle Victor, his actual father and Effing, the latter is confronted with the – symbolic - death of three sons: Firstly, he walked out on his wife and thus left his unborn son Solomon. Secondly, he feels responsible for the fatal accident of Byrne and finally, his friend and foster-son Pavel Shum dies in an accident. This man lived with the old men for thirty-seven years and Effing even refers to him as "the one true friend I ever had." (Moon Palace, 115) This leads to the conclusion that Effing's biography does not only mirror but also constitutes the inverse of Fogg's<sup>138</sup> which demonstrates the complexity of their relationship. It seems noteworthy in this context that Barber also loses his father but without even knowing him. This aspect contributes to the impression that he is a rather tragic and solitary figure. Reflecting on his father's fate Fogg states:

To have spent the first fifty years of your life thinking your father was dead, and then to discover that he had been alive all along, only to learn in that same instant that he was in fact now literally dead – I could not even presume to guess how someone would react to a landslide of those proportions. (Moon Palace, 228)

The narrative as a whole thus revolves around the desire for and the loss of paternal figures and constitutes a repetition of certain patterns. Apparently, the same can be said about Auster's oeuvre in general which will be demonstrated in the following.

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<sup>138</sup> See Shiloh, 124.

Although *The Music of Chance* is not concerned with the father/son relationship to the same extent as *Moon Palace*, this theme should not be overlooked in a discussion of this novel. Apart from the fact that Nashe, like Pozzi, grows up fatherless, it is remarkable that he is one himself, even in a twofold sense. First of all, he actually has a little daughter named Juliette. Like Julian Barber - at this point not yet called Thomas Effing – he leaves his child which evidently causes a feeling of guilt. In some way, the memory of her even seems to haunt and torture him. When he listens to *The Marriage of Figaro*, to name only one example, he “would imagine that Juliette was singing to him, that it was her voice he was hearing.” (Music, 186) Nashe’s sense of guilt is further indicated by his violent fantasies of killing the overseer’s grandson Floyd who has a strong affection for him.<sup>139</sup> His scorn for the boy then becomes clear when he compares Floyd Junior with his daughter:

Except for his age, he seemed to have nothing in common with Juliette, and when Nashe compared the sad pallor of this little boy with the brightness and sparkle of his curly-headed daughter, his darling dervish with her crystal laugh and chubby knees, he felt nothing but contempt for him. (Music, 196)

Apart from being Juliette’s father, he appears to adopt Jack Pozzi as a kind of foster son. This is emphasised by fact that he constantly refers to his comrade as the “the kid” and may be reminiscent of Auster’s novel *Mr. Vertigo*. The novel tells the story of the orphaned boy Walter Rawley whom the Hungarian Master Yehudi rescues from the street. His new mentor teaches him to walk on air and in the course of the story increasingly changes from a strict teacher to Walter’s surrogate father. Comparable to this boy, Pozzi seems to desire a paternal figure as well because his father walked out on the family when he was still a baby. He tells Nashe about the first encounter between him and this man. When the stranger asserts that Pozzi is his son he answers: “‘You can’t be my father,’ I say again. ‘Fathers don’t go away. They live at home with their families.’ ‘Some fathers,’ the guy says, ‘but not all of them’”. (Music, 38) The man proves his assertion by showing the boy his driver’s license according to which his name is John Anthony Pozzi. Hence, his fatherhood is reduced to a formal document. This may be comparable to the will that determines the sum Nashe inherits. It is also the only sign for a connection between him and his father. This piece of paper is nothing more than a “peculiar way to make amends” (Music, 2) for Nashe. These examples may underline the difference between this narrative and *Moon Palace* in regard to the

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<sup>139</sup> See Shiloh, 177.

representation of father and son relationships: Whereas the emotional bond between the male family members is evident in *Moon Palace*, the same cannot be said about *The Music of Chance* in which this kind of kinship is mostly nothing more than a formal fact. Therefore, it seems highly ironical that apparently the warmest filial and paternal feelings exist in the family of the sinister and sadistic overseer Murks.<sup>140</sup>

In *Oracle Night* Auster comes back to a topic that has already been touched on in *Moon Palace*, namely abortion. In the earlier published novel, Fogg's girlfriend Kitty discovers that she is pregnant which, as Fogg notes retrospectively, "dropped like a cannonball into our little pond, and before we could brace ourselves for the shock, our boat had been swamped and we were swimming for dear life." In contrast to Fogg, Kitty does not want to have the baby since it

was no more than an abstraction for her, a hypothetical instance of future life rather than a life that had already come into being. Until it was born, it did not exist. From my point of view, however, the baby had begun to exist the moment Kitty told me she was carrying it inside her. [...] If we went ahead and arranged for abortion, I felt it would be the same thing as committing murder.  
(*Moon Palace*, 271)

And although Fogg concedes that "all the reasons were on Kitty's side" he says: "I wanted to be a father [...] The baby was my chance to undo the loneliness of my childhood, to be part of a family, to belong to something that was more than just myself". (*Moon Palace*, 272) The situation described in *Oracle Night* is almost identical to this because, like Kitty and Fogg, Grace and Orr have a harmonious love relationship. Again, it is the woman who is in favour of an abortion whereas Orr wants to have the child at any price. In the course of their argument he even accuses her of being a murderer and states "Married people don't kill their babies. Not when they love each other." (*Oracle Night*, 115) Later Orr ruefully comments on that attack as follows: "From every practical vantage, she was right to hesitate about the pregnancy, but the very rationality of her doubts seemed to touch off some morbid, irrational fear in me" (*Oracle Night*, 116) As usually in the novels of Paul Auster, the female character represents the rational and responsible position, whereas the male protagonist reacts in an emotional and actually selfish way. Interestingly, both Orr and Fogg desire to have a child and to become fathers for reasons that merely concern their own life. The former self-consciously admits:

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<sup>140</sup> See *Shiloh*, 177.



It wasn't about having a baby – it was about me. Ever since I'd met her, I had lived in mortal fear that I would lose Grace [...] Having a child together would erase that anxiety and prevent her from wanting to decamp. (*Oracle Night*, 117)

Although Grace agrees to keep the baby, Orr doesn't become a father because his wife loses the child towards the ending of the novel. Nevertheless, his and Fogg's behaviour seem to strengthen the impression that in Auster's writing, father figures are mostly portrayed as irresponsible and almost childish characters. It should be added, though, that in the context of the story their reaction may be understandable to a certain degree.

Apart from Orr's potential fatherhood, *Oracle Night* also deals with an actual father and son relationship namely between John Trause and Jacob. At this point it has to be mentioned that Auster's depiction of the drug-addicted and violent character Jacob led to a number of speculations about the autobiographical aspect of this episode. The reason for that is the striking similarity between this fictional character and Auster's son Daniel who in 1998 pleaded guilty to stealing money from a notorious drug dealer called Alig. Daniel Auster later also admitted that he was present in the apartment when Alig was brutally killed by another man. These speculations are also based on obvious parallels between the real-life events and parts of the novel *What I Loved* by Auster's wife Siri Hustvedt. Her husband, however, denies any parallels between the character in his book and his son.<sup>141</sup> Anyway, John Trause – which is an anagram of the author's surname – differs from most of the father figures in Auster's books since, at first, he selflessly accepts the responsibility for Jacob. In his case, it is the son who leaves the family. Trause says to his friend Orr. "I've lost him [...]. After the stunt he's just pulled, I'll never believe another word he says to me." What he refers to is that Jacob obtained by fraud three thousand dollars from his father by feigning to enrol for the University. Trause disappointedly adds:

If you want to know the truth, I feel like wringing his neck. You're lucky you don't have any children, Sid. They're nice when they're small, but after that they break your heart and make you miserable. Five feet, that's the maximum. They shouldn't be allowed to grow any taller than that. (*Oracle Night*, 144)

In the further course of the story his son breaks into Orr's apartment and finally he is responsible for Grace's miscarriage. After recovering that Jacob broke off his drug rehab program, Trause decides to disinherit his son. It is certainly significant that again the

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<sup>141</sup> See Bone

relationship between him and his son is symbolised by a piece of paper, namely his will. As Orr explains, “by the simple act of tearing up all copies of that document, Trause disinherited his son in front of his lawyer eyes.” (Oracle Night, 200) Hence, he metaphorically destroys his connection to Jacob and so, in contrast to the two novels discussed above, he does not literally run away from his role as a father. On the contrary, after numerous desperate efforts, he consciously decides against it. This is likely to mirror Auster’s personal experiences and, perhaps, should not be misinterpreted as a postmodern technique of characterisation. Nonetheless, seen in a broader context, his consideration of the various different aspects of the relationship between fathers and sons in his books may underline the author’s worldview that all of these stories are connected by a common source or, to quote again Fogg’s uncle Victor, that “the correspondences are infinite”.

## IV. Conclusion

In the last years, the texts of Paul Auster have been discussed and interpreted from various vantage points, emphasising a number of different aspects. What seems to be agreed on is that Auster in his works frequently employs features of literary postmodernism. This finally led to his reputation as postmodern author. Such an attribution, however, may be problematic since the term postmodernism is in itself tremendously ambiguous. The probably most difficult task is to draw a distinction line between what is known as modernism and its successor postmodernism. It has been shown that the former is generally concerned with so called 'epistemological' questions, hence questions of knowledge, whereas the latter tends to revolve around problems of the mode of being or 'ontological' matters. This tendency seems to manifest itself in different ways so that postmodern literature is marked by a number of generic features. It can be argued that these texts are characterised by intertextual allusions and critical self-reflection which is why they are frequently labelled as 'metafiction'. Moreover, the concepts of truth and knowledge are put into question, just like the traditional form of a linear narration. Hence, many postmodern narratives reveal a circular and open-ended structure and a random, or 'aleatory', arrangement. Another pivotal characteristic is the use and re-interpretation of various genres which mostly serve as a model that is established and subverted at the same time.

As previously demonstrated, the works of Paul Auster display a number of these typically postmodernist features. By now it appears to be accepted as a fact that his perhaps best known works, the three instalments of *The New York Trilogy*, are clearly examples of postmodernist literature. In regard to his later books, however, this cannot be claimed so easily. With the aid of three representative novels *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Oracle Night*, it has been underlined that Auster indeed makes frequent use of intrinsically postmodernist techniques in most of his texts, but also that he is strongly influenced by the tradition of literary modernism. Apparently, this holds true for the structure and form of his narratives since they display most of the afore-mentioned stylistic devices such as self-references, intertextual allusions, open endings and elements of different genres. In the case of the three discussed novels, these are the picaresque and the fantastic novel, the Bildungsroman and the fairy tale which seems to be Auster's favourite paragon. Apart from that, it can be observed that many of his texts have the form of so called Chinese-boxes which means that a frame narrative embraces a number of embedded sub-narratives. This special structure has been referred to as 'story in the story' and is indeed one of the major characteristics of Auster's

writing. In this context, it has also been demonstrated that history plays a significant role in the three examples wherein it is frequently represented in the form of a collection.

Furthermore, the crucial function of chance and fate, also in regard to the narrative structure, has been stressed since these opposing principles are generally associated with the books of Paul Auster. Another typical feature of his texts is the continual deterioration of an individual which may also signify the decay of human society. This repeatedly occurring pattern could be labelled as the 'zero'.

Besides these structural elements, the representation of characteristic motifs may as well be described as postmodern. Nonetheless, these points again strengthen the assumption that Auster's writing shows influences of both modernist and postmodernist literature. What can be certainly claimed, though, is that the author more often than not underlines the ambiguous nature of the world. Examples like the sudden inheritance and money in general, different symbols or the role of art and literature may prove this theory. Similarly, his specific way to represent time and space in his narratives points out quite clearly his affinity with the postmodern tradition.

The third point that has to be considered in this discussion is Auster's style of characterisation. Comparable to certain themes and motifs, he obviously uses a number of recurring types. Three different aspects have been established which are of major importance, namely the role of the protagonist, the so called ex-centric old man and finally the complex relationship between fathers and sons. Again, Auster underlines the ambivalence of these characters which may further stress his 'postmodernity'. In contrast to the protagonist, whose search for identity and the so called true self the reader is allowed to follow, most of the ex-centric old men in Auster's narratives are portrayed from an outside point of view. Their character cannot be determined since they appear to oscillate between different identities or, in other words, to carry two faces.

Hence, these explorations may lead to the conclusion that *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance* and *Oracle Night* exemplify the influence of the postmodern tradition on Paul Auster's writing. At the same time, it has been pointed out that there is a great difference between the decisively postmodernist and post-structuralist form of *The New York Trilogy* and his later published works. In these novels, the author seems to incline towards a more traditional style which may imply that Auster mostly blends elements of postmodernist and modernist literature.

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## VII. German Resumé

Der amerikanische Schriftsteller Paul Auster wird häufig den sogenannten postmodernen Autoren der Gegenwartsliteratur zugerechnet. Allerdings basiert diese Annahme in großem Maß auf den drei Bänden der *New York Trilogy* - *city of glass*, *ghosts* und *the locked room* – Austers ersten nicht-autobiographischen Veröffentlichungen. Um eine solche Zuordnung zu rechtfertigen, müssen jedoch auch die zahlreichen später erschienen Romane berücksichtigt werden, die sich in vielerlei Hinsicht von der Trilogie unterscheiden.

Dazu wäre es zu allererst nötig, den Begriff „postmodern“ zu definieren. Man kann aber eher von einer Annäherung sprechen, da es kaum allgemein gültige und anerkannte Kriterien gibt die eine eindeutige Definition ermöglichen würden. Es wurde trotzdem der Versuch unternommen, einige, für diese literarische Strömung charakteristische Merkmale herauszuarbeiten wie etwa die Tendenz zur Selbstreflexion, die Verwendung von Versatzstücken unterschiedlichster Genres und intertextueller Verweise.

Die drei behandelten Romane stehen sowohl thematisch als auch stilistisch stellvertretend für Austers bisherige Arbeit da sie deren verschiedene Aspekte widerspiegeln. Jedes der Bücher ist zwar in gewisser Hinsicht typisch für den Stil des Autors, soll aber als vollkommen eigenständiger Text gesehen werden.

Das am frühesten erschienene *Moon Palace* stellt eine Art modernen Bildungsroman dar und kann als der heiterste der drei Romane bezeichnet werden. Darin wird besonders Austers Interesse für die Beziehung zwischen Vätern und Söhnen deutlich sowie seine Faszination für das Wechselspiel zwischen Zufall und Schicksal.

Diese Thematik spielt auch in *The Music of Chance* eine wichtige Rolle, wobei dieser Text um vieles düsterer und pessimistischer wirkt. Darin finden sich typische Merkmale des pikaresken Romans, aber auch der klassischen Tragödie. Das zeigt, dass sich in Paul Austers Romanen die unterschiedlichsten Einflüsse mischen und spricht für eine Zuordnung zur Tradition postmoderner Literatur.

*Oracle Night* schließlich ist am ehesten mit der *New York Trilogy* vergleichbar, denn es ist sprachlich und formell experimenteller als die beiden anderen Erzählungen. Auch der Aufbau aus ineinander verschachtelten Erzählsträngen unterstreicht, dass *Oracle Night* stilistisch eine Art Rückkehr zu Austers Wurzeln ist.

Die Analyse dieser drei Beispiele hat verdeutlicht, dass sich in Paul Austers Romanen die Einflüsse moderner und postmoderner Literatur vermischen. Daher würde eine strikte Zuordnung zu einer einzelnen Strömung sicherlich zu kurz greifen und der Arbeit Austers nicht gerecht werden.

## **Lebenslauf**

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